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2-14-2022

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Recommended Citation

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Confronting Kuyper: A Review of Calvinism for a Secular Age (Chapter Seven: On Race)

Abstract

"To filter out the racist impurities in Kuyper's thought, we must hear those voices with other backgrounds and experiences."

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.

<https://inallthings.org/confronting-kuyper-a-review-of-calvinism-for-a-secular-age-chapter-seven/>

Keywords

In All Things, book review, Calvinism for a Secular Age, twenty-first century, reading, Abraham Kuyper, Stone Lectures, Jessica R. Joustra, Robert J. Joustra

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

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Confronting Kuyper: A Review of *Calvinism for a Secular Age* (Chapter Seven: On Race)

Shaun Stiemsma

February 14, 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

Publisher: IVP Academic

Publishing Date: February 8, 2022

Pages: 248 (Paperback)

ISBN: 978-1514001462

Of all the impurities in Kuyper's thought that we might seek to distill out, there is one that is both startlingly clear and insidiously widespread: his racism. Though his racist ideas are commonly acknowledged and deplored by neo-Calvinists and others, little real work has been done to address this central problem in Kuyper's worldview. Vincent Bacote, theology professor at Wheaton, contributes a chapter to *Calvinism for a Secular Age* that places Kuyper's racism in front of neo-Calvinist readers in a way that requires each of us to grapple with our inheritance of his legacy.

Reading While Black

For me as a white reader, reading Bacote's chapter is an active confrontation with Kuyper's overt racism as revealed in his Stone Lectures, and it should thoroughly unsettle every reader. Though he seems hesitant to speak from his personal experience, Bacote takes us through his first reading of the lectures as a young man who had begun to think he'd found "an ideal theological home" (148) in Kuyper's thought. Bacote cites Kuyper's claim that "No impulse for any higher life has ever gone forth from " (150), his confident assertion that God "determined and appointed" Africans to be unfit for democratic government (151), and his hateful assumption that anyone who could choose would want to be "of the Aryan race rather than Hottentot or Kaffir" (152), both of which are now seen as racial slurs. These are passages that I can remember reading as a twenty-year old and finding offensive, but essentially as ideas that are relics of their time which, reprehensible as they are, can be left aside in dealing with Kuyper as a whole.

For Bacote, these are personal assaults, and he invites us to understand them as such. He recalls his reading as an experience of trauma, calling it "a major crisis" (148) as his view of

Kuyper was “completely unsettled” (152). Even with his scholarly restraint, he acknowledges that he was left in “a vortex of confusion” (157) and we, as predominantly white neo-Calvinists, must start there with him if we are to consider how to respond to these racist ideas in the 21st century. For me, Bacote re-cast Kuyper’s words not as a deplorable historical artifact but as a direct insult to fellow believers, as if Kuyper’s Christ cried “Mine” a little more softly and with less passion over an entire continent, its peoples, and its cultures.

Three Responses

After sharing these specific damning quotes and his experience reading them, Bacote explores modern responses to Kuyper’s racism, grouping them into three general types. Although all of them are thoroughly critical of Kuyper’s racism, none of them seems to fully satisfy Bacote, and he seems to desire to instill that dissatisfaction in his readers as well. First, Bacote cites Peter Paris as responding with “critique and rejection,” which entails an absolute dismissal of all Kuyper’s ideas as “irredeemably awash with racism” (154). This view, while widespread and perhaps even obvious among secular scholars and many young people, is unlikely to be adopted by many neo-Calvinist readers, and Bacote is critical of its refusal to find value in a system of thought he finds so much commonality with. Second, Bacote references a “critique situated in history,” citing neo-Calvinist scholar James Bratt, who sees Kuyper as “subject to a prevailing view on race” to account for his racism (155). These views must be acknowledged and critiqued according to Bratt, but they do not necessarily further impact our use of Kuyper’s thought. This response is dominant among those likely to read the book, but Bacote warns of the danger of contextualizing past racism without addressing its presence today. Finally, Bacote finds a response not exactly rejection or acceptance, but a “critique tied to theological themes” in Daniel Camacho’s argument that Kuyper’s racism distorts his understanding of common grace. Though Bacote disagrees with Camacho’s particular claim, and suggests that none of these responses so far “*critically* engage with Kuyper on this subject” (156), this path may be the most promising, as it provides a new “way to make more of Kuyper’s legacy by pursuing neglected trajectories for bringing God glory” (160).

A Path Forward?

Ultimately, Bacote continues to wrestle with acknowledging in Kuyper “what is helpful and useful” while feeling “dismay at Kuyper’s failings” (161). He challenges readers to join in the “task and opportunity” of dealing honestly with these problems and carrying the best of Kuyper’s legacy forward (161). In his own response, he first uses Kuyper’s ideas to correct his racist assumptions, pointing out ways Kuyper’s racism is inconsistent with his broader thought. Specifically, Kuyper’s emphasis on the “multiformity” of Christian worship and insight can help us value the worship and insights of other peoples.

But to do this, we cannot only listen to Kuyper: Christians of European backgrounds must “lend an ear to these other voices” (160), especially those voices that Kuyper so thoroughly degraded, to hear “facets of truth to which we are blind yet which we need in order to have a better

understanding of reality and practice of life” (160). This blindness is, unfortunately, easy to see in communities—churches and institutions—that stand in Kuyper’s tradition but seem to have no space for these other voices, as we remain predominantly white and middle class, and often don’t even know how to welcome let alone learn from those who are not.

Though I would have loved to get even more of Bacote’s visceral response to Kuyper’s racism, as it might more strongly impact readers, his restraint requires readers to listen carefully to his pain and confusion, and careful listening requires a conscious choice to allow others to speak. Bacote’s invitation to listen to his experience and his call to listen to other voices challenges us to realize that white neo-Calvinists cannot endeavor to purify Kuyper’s legacy on their own. To filter out the racist impurities in Kuyper’s thought, we must hear those voices with other backgrounds and experiences. To hear those voices, we must make them welcome in our schools, conferences, and churches. To make them welcome, we must acknowledge and alter the ways in which Kuyper’s legacy of racism and ethnocentrism are carried forward in our institutions. To effect this change, we must humble ourselves before our brothers and sisters in Christ from all traditions and repent. In short, we must let God do his work in our hearts first: with re-formed hearts, attitudes, and institutions, perhaps we can together remove impurities from Kuyper’s thought and bring forth the new and previously unimagined flavors of God’s incomprehensible grace.