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Abstract

"Kuyper's comprehensive vision for the Christian life has continued to capture a broader Christian imagination."

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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Kuyper on Science: A Review of *Calvinism for a Secular Age*

Channon Visscher

February 15, 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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Sometime in the late 18th century, a Dutch baker in Gouda baked thin layers of dough in a waffle iron and joined them together with a caramel filling. The stroopwafel was born. Stroopwafels could soon be found in abundance throughout the Netherlands, and as a novelty treat wherever the Dutch had immigrated in sufficient numbers. In 2016, United Airlines began serving stroopwafels on domestic flights. They were so popular that their temporary removal from the menu led to outcry and their eventual restoration.¹ Their intrinsic goodness had transcended culture.

Admittedly, comparing Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism* (delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898) to the creation and distribution of the stroopwafel is a bit of stretch. However, it helps illustrate one of themes found in *Calvinism for a Secular Age: A Twenty-First Century Reading of Kuyper's Stone Lectures*, edited by Jessica and Robert Joustra. How is it that we are discussing otherwise obscure lectures (on Calvinism, no less) by this pastor-professor-politician over a century later? Far from remaining a novelty of the subculture of Dutch Reformed immigrants that first embraced it, Kuyper's comprehensive vision for the Christian life has continued to capture a broader Christian imagination.

Calvinism for a Secular Age presents an excellent introduction to Kuyper's thought as expressed in his *Lectures on Calvinism*. As noted by previous reviewers, the structure of each chapter provides helpful framing: What did Kuyper say? What did Kuyperians do? What should we do? This allows for a brief summary of the content of and response to Kuyper's work, while exploring implications for our contemporary setting.

The book also skillfully addresses the central tensions of Kuyper's problematic legacy. Which things should we keep? Which things should we discard? And can this be done without losing the essence animating Kuyper's thought? What do we do when Kuyper contradicts

Kuyper? As contributing author Vincent Bacote points out, there's an opportunity here to "decide what to bring from Kuyper's era and what to leave in the past."

With this in mind, I will focus my attention here on "Kuyper and Science" (Chapter 4), written by Deborah Haarsma, astronomer (previously at Calvin University) and president of Biologos. Haarsma provides a generous-yet-clear-eyed view of Kuyper's lecture on "Calvinism and Science".²

Like Haarsma, I also first directly encountered Kuyper in college (through this very lecture). Here I found themes that deeply resonated, through a different kind of Calvinism I was still learning to articulate: one that embraces and even celebrates study of the physical creation. Thus, Kuyper argues, a Christian worldview should "foster a love of science" as a way to "study the handiwork of God and to learn more of his attributes." Kuyper highlights the metaphor of the Belgic Confession: that of a revelatory (and comprehensible) universe laid before our eyes like a beautiful book.³

This confessional approach helps form the basis for Kuyper's argument for *common grace*: that the witness of the physical creation is revealed to *all* humans. Thus, as Haarsma notes, Christians can, and should, participate in modern science with others in the broader academy—even where religious commitments may differ.

As later Kuyperians would further develop⁴, Kuyper rightfully notes that no fully "neutral" approach can be taken toward science—it is always shaped by our context and presuppositions. Any apparent conflict is not between science and faith, but "between differing worldviews" (89). However, it is difficult to reconcile Kuyper's teaching on common grace with his forceful call for a separate system of science—one that is mostly defined by its opposition to evolution.

Reflecting on the scientific findings of the past century and on Kuyper's own principles for science, it is here that Haarsma identifies what might be left behind. As Haarsma notes, in his zeal to reject atheistic evolutionism (i.e. at a worldview level)⁵, "he does not follow his own principles regarding common grace and general revelation." These principles point to many areas of agreement between "Christian" presuppositions and those broadly shared by scientists: that the physical universe is comprehensible based upon careful study, subject to a consistent set of underlying laws. Following Kuyper's cue, this may be due in part to the fact that modern science (as we know it) emerged from a Christian context.⁶

What of Kuyper shall we keep, then? We can continue to cultivate a love of science, recognize its proper domain, know that science and faith need not be in conflict, celebrate scientific inquiry and discovery, and continue to wonder at the beauty and witness of a good creation.

In a contemporary culture that often provides a narrative of conflict between science and faith, "the Kuyperian tradition offers a rich, compelling, alternative: a full-bodied Christian faith, centered on Christ and Scripture, that encompasses all of life, including science" (104). This

approach takes seriously the reality of living in a physical creation, while recognizing the cosmic implications of Christ's dominion over all things. This is perhaps a "stropwafel goodness" that can be celebrated by Christians worldwide—a compelling vision of Calvinism ready to move beyond its humble Dutch roots to encourage all Christians (and especially those studying the sciences) to serve the church, the academy, and the community.

1. <https://marker.medium.com/how-the-stropwafel-became-the-most-unexpected-product-to-go-viral-8d5ce47b89fb>
2. Haarsma helpfully points out that Kuyper's use of the term science was much broader than how we might define it today. Haarsma also points out four aspects of the natural sciences: presuppositions, methods, findings, and implications.
3. Article 2 of the Belgic Confession, <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/belgic-confession#toc-article-2-the-means-by-which-we-know-god>
4. E.g., Herman Dooyeweerd, *The Twilight of Western Thought*; Roy Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*
5. A limitation of Kuyper's approach in "Calvinism and Science", as Haarsma notes, is that he does not distinguish the scientific findings about evolution from the naturalistic philosophy (i.e. a worldview) of atheistic evolutionism. Although the concept of methodological naturalism would not be fully developed until the late 20th century, it is consistent with some of the general themes found in Kuyper's treatment of scientific presuppositions and common grace.
6. It is somewhat surprising that this connection was not more explicitly claimed by Kuyper, given his (often exaggerated) tendency to claim causation when there is correlation (such as his purported causal relationship between Calvinism and the invention of the telescope, or Calvinism and Rembrandt).