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## Clarifying, Complicating, and Challenging Kuyper: A Review of Calvinism for a Secular Age

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## Clarifying, Complicating, and Challenging Kuyper: A Review of Calvinism for a Secular Age

### Abstract

"We must name and own the dysfunctional bits, not to shift the blame to others, but to take responsibility for how we continue in the time and place we've been called."

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/clarifying-complicating-and-challenging-kuyper-a-review-of-calvinism-for-a-secular-world/>

### Disciplines

Christianity

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

# Clarifying, Complicating, and Challenging Kuyper: A Review of *Calvinism for a Secular Age*

Justin Ariel Bailey

February 16, 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

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**Pages:** 248 (Paperback)

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I first heard the name Abraham Kuyper in a talk by John Piper. The year was 2004, and I was attending Piper's Conference on "Sex and the Supremacy of Christ." I had discovered Piper during college and was drinking deeply from the Calvinist cisterns for which Piper is known. Unsurprisingly, Piper's reference to Kuyper was to the famous "every square inch" line from the Stone Lectures. At that time in my life, an endorsement from John Piper meant everything, and so I made a mental note to read something by Kuyper. This led me finally to read Kuyper's Stone Lectures for myself.

As I read, I remember thinking two things. First, *this is a different sort of Calvinism than I'm used to*. It was more expansive, and somehow not fixated on the five points of Calvinism. Second, *the way he talks about non-Western culture leaves a lot to be desired*. As a Filipino American, I found his assumption of Western cultural superiority to be naïve at best, and at times deeply racist (see Shaun Stiemsma's review). I set the lectures aside, not knowing how important they would become to me when I returned to graduate school a decade later.

I've told the story elsewhere of my move from Piper to Kuyper. For now, it is enough to say that the world and life vision set forth in the lectures—captured wonderfully in the Joustras opening post—became vital to my theological outlook. Nevertheless, I have sometimes found myself in the position of clarifying and defending the Kuyperian vision to those who are suspicious. During my doctoral studies, I had a neighbor who hated Kuyper's lectures so much that he burned them in the community fire pit. Last year a student who had been assigned the text carried the book around and read the more objectionable passages out loud for anyone who wanted to listen. At a school deeply shaped by Kuyperian sensibilities (both the apartments and

the honors program bear his name), he was concerned that we would simply gloss over Kuyper's flaws.

But anyone who belongs to a living tradition (and oh how lonely not to belong!) knows that it is much like belonging to a family. There can simultaneously be much to celebrate and much to lament. There are gifts we've received and baggage we carry. We must name and own the dysfunctional bits, not to shift the blame to others, but to take responsibility for how we continue in the time and place we've been called.

As I wrote in my own blurb for the book, *Calvinism for a Secular World* offers a welcome tonic, amplifying my gratitude and acknowledging my grief, making it an essential companion to Kuyper's lectures. It *clarifies* his aims, *complicates* his legacy, and *challenges* his flaws. When necessary, it moves forward by reading Kuyper against himself. Most importantly, it *continues* Kuyper's project, offering a generative and generous vision for all of life, one sorely needed in our secular age.

I am thankful for the conversation that has taken place here surrounding the book. Here are some of the questions that remain for me:

- *Situating*: What is the relationship of Kuyperian Christianity to the broader Christian family? To evangelicalism? To fundamentalism? To the global church? How do we locate ourselves on the map without assuming that we are the whole map?
- *Theologizing*: What is the relationship between Reformed theology, classically understood with its emphasis on covenant and election and the Kuyperian vision? Is there a "mere Kuyperianism"? What are the nonnegotiables? When we object to historic emphases of Reformed theology (our Baptist friends do with covenant baptism and Arminian Kuyperians object to the five points), how does that shape the Kuyperian vision differently?
- *Continuing*: How do we continue to acknowledge, own, and lament the pathologies endemic to the Kuyperian tradition (e.g., triumphalism) while also nurturing and offering its greatest gifts?
- *Renewing*: If Kuyperian Calvinism is a renewal movement, what other streams of Christian faith does it need to be renewed by? As Rich Mouw wrote in his own introduction to Kuyper, "Abraham Kuyper, meet Mother Teresa." Who are the other "saints" that the Kuyperian tradition needs to get to know? (I ask this question to the Joustras in our podcast conversation,

The Kuyperian tradition can only continue as we look forward and plant its intuitions in new cultural soils. But we must also do the hard work of looking back. As Jaroslav Pelikan put it, we do not seek to reprimarize the "dead faith of the living" but converse and commune with the "living faith of the dead." We may thank the Joustras, and the contributors to this volume for helping us continue the conversation.