

Naudé, P

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University

The two faces of Calvin in South Africa: In honour of the 500th commemoration of John Calvin's birth¹ (Part I)

ABSTRACT

In this two-part reflection, the two receptions of Calvin in South Africa are set out against the background of the *status confessionis* debate in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The first reception of Calvin (this contribution) occurred via the neo-Calvinist interpretation of Abraham Kuyper as adopted in the specific context of South Africa. The second reception (see next contributions) stood in direct opposition to this and attempted to interpret both Kuyper and Calvin in a liberative sense. The articles end with a short analysis of the rejection clauses of the Behar confession to demonstrate how the second reception of Calvin played in definitive role in the formulation of this confession.

1. INTRODUCTION

These reflections are a contribution to the festive commemoration of Calvin around the world during 2009. The two articles below were read as papers to a German-speaking audience in the context of a lecture series by the University of Basel on the reception of Calvin in various part of the world. Reflections were offered from diverse settings such as Hungary, the USA, China, Germany, and South Africa.

In part one (this article) a short historical background is provided for the situation of *status confessionis* in general, but with specific focus on the South African situation. The first face of Calvin is then sketched via the reception of Calvin in the mainly neo-Calvinist theology of Abraham Kuyper and his South African followers.

In part two (next article) the second face of Calvin is set out in relation to tensions in Calvin's own work, but more focussed on the reception of the "liberative" Calvin in the works of theologians like Allan Boesak, John de Gruchy, Beyers Naude and Willie Jonker. This second reception of Calvin is subsequently linked to the rejection clauses of the three middle articles of the Belhar confession. The link to Belhar serves as direct antithesis to the first reception of Calvin and provides the basis for a short conclusion on the future of Calvin-theology in South Africa.

2. HERESY AND STATUS CONFESSIONIS

The church declares a state of confession when a situation arises in which neutral or mediocre matters (*adiaphora*) become issues of grave importance that threaten the very heart of the gospel message, and thus compel the church to witness and act over against this threat.

¹ An adapted version of a German paper delivered in Basel, Switzerland, on 7 May 2009 in the context of the Calvin year. The topic for this public lecture on Calvin was provided by the University of Basel who requested an analysis of "Rassismus als Häresie: Komplexe calvinistische Wirkungen in Südafrika".

Although the threat may be “ethical” in nature, the church interprets this as a theological or doctrinal matter, and considers such threat to the gospel a false teaching or heresy.²

In the 20th century, three³ such occasions arose:

First: In the German *Kirchenkampf* against National-Socialism, issues such as church structure, eligibility for church office, and church discipline, became matters that fundamentally threatened the credibility of the gospel and compelled the Confessing Church in Barmen to accept a new declaration of faith in 1934.

Second: The ecumenical rejection of racism – especially as legalised in South Africa – led the Lutheran World Federation in Dar es Salaam (1977) to declare a *status confessionis* on matters of race-based church membership and the political system of apartheid. This was followed by two further declarations on the same matter by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Ottawa (1982) and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa (1982). It was this latter church who subsequently adopted the Confession of Belhar⁴ (1986) against the heresy of a false gospel.

The third instance relates to the Reformierter Bund in Germany that in 1982 announced a *status confessionis* on the possession of nuclear arms as they judged that such arms fundamentally threaten the possibility of human life and puts the core of the Christian faith at risk.

For the sake of this paper, I therefore focus on the second example of *status confessionis* referred to above: The declaration of racism as a heresy was primarily directed against the formation of separate Reformed churches for different races, and a Christian gospel that supported a political and legal system of state-enforced racial separation.⁵ The neutral matters of church membership and structure, as well as the political order of society, became matters of confession that relate to the core of the gospel message.

“But where does Calvin fit into this story?”, one may ask. Let us make a short detour into South African history⁶:

The first permanent settlement of Europeans in South Africa in 1652 was of Dutch descent. As employees of the Dutch East India Company, directed to set up a half-way station between Europe and the East, they brought with them the Christian faith that was primarily shaped by Calvinist stream of the Protestant Reformation. The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) was established under the auspices of the classis of Amsterdam, and held Scripture and the Three Formulae of Unity (The Belgium Confession, Heidelberg Catechism and Canons of Dordt) in high esteem.

As local people of mixed race and black people converted to the Christian faith, they were

2 For a conceptual and historical analysis read Dirk Smit, “A status confessionis in South Africa?” *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa* 47 (1984) pp.21-46

3 A quite recent example that did not yet reach full confessional status is the *processus confessionis* announced by the World Council of Churches on issues of economic and ecological justice. Although the World Alliance of Reformed Churches adopted the Accra Confession in 2004 as fundamental critique against the “empire” of global capitalism and its devastating ecological impact, the Alliance itself recognises that Accra is not a confession in the traditional sense of the world. It could however become the fourth example of a status confessionis.

4 For the confessional text, accompanying letter and insightful discussion, see Daan Cloete and Dirk Smit (eds.), *A moment of truth. The confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission church 1982* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

5 For an analysis of the heresy-debate, read John W de Gruchy, and Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.), *Apartheid is a heresy*. (Cape Town: David Philip, 1983).

6 One of the best theological interpretations of South Africa’s history remains John W de Gruchy, *The church struggle in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979).

baptised into the one DRC church. Due to social and language differences, as well as the missionary idea of *Volkskirchen*, it was decided by the Cape Synod of the DRC in 1857 that separate communion services would be held for indigenous people. This eventually led to the establishment of new separate Reformed churches based on race: In 1881 the coloured Dutch Reformed Mission Church was established, followed by the black and Indian churches in 1963 and 1968 respectively. Together with the “white” mother church, these four churches formed the so-called “DRC-family” of churches in South Africa.

The European people of Dutch (and later French) descent, slowly built an own language and identity over against the colonial powers of the day – whether Dutch or British. They increasingly saw themselves as Afrikaners (“from Africa and speaking Afrikaans”) with nationalist ideals of political independence and self-determination. These nationalist ideals grew especially strong after the defeat in the English War of 1899-1902 and the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. When the National Party won the white elections in 1948, the path was opened for grand apartheid and an intensification of racial separation.

The political situation at that point sadly mirrored the racial segregation in the DRC-family and drew its moral legitimacy from a specific interpretation of the Christian gospel understood as Calvinism. This represents the first face of Calvin in South Africa. How could such a racial situation in church and society be derived from a call on the name of Christ and the Calvinist tradition? To answer this question, we need to take a diversion to the Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper.

3. THE FIRST FACE OF CALVIN IN SOUTH AFRICA: INTERPRETATIONS OF ABRHAM KUYPER

Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), a self-professed (neo-) Calvinist since 1870, exerted enormous influence on church and society in The Netherlands during his life-time.⁷ Kuyper was a pastor, a brilliant scholar and theologian, and an active public figure who eventually became prime minister. He commenced his reflections on Calvinism with a series of Bible studies in which he worked out the basis for what became his formal dogmatic works published between 1888 and 1917.⁸

One should be careful not to draw a simple, direct line between Kuyper and Afrikaner Calvinism.⁹ However, the weaknesses in Kuyper’s theology did create the opportunity for interpretations that could legitimately call on his - and by implication on Calvin’s - authority and blessing. In highly simplified terms, three elements of Kuyper’s vast thinking are relevant here: his cosmology based on a specific interpretation of general grace, his ecclesiology, and his view of human and social development.

3.1 Cosmology embedded in general grace

One of the key thrusts of Calvin’s own thought, and a driving force behind Kuyper’s thinking,

7 For an overview and evaluation of Kuyper’s life and work, read Luis E. Lugo (ed): *Religion, pluralism, and public life. Abraham Kuyper’s legacy for the twenty-first century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). and Cornelis van der Kooi and Jan de Bruijn: *Kuyper reconsidered. Aspects of his life and work.* (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1999).

8 The most encompassing exposition of his thought is the broad overview of theology as a science in three volumes, *Encyclopaedie der Heiligen Godgeleerdheid* (1893-1894) en *De Gemeene Gratie*, also in three volumes (1903-1905). For fuller literature information, see W.H. Velema, “Kuyper as theolog. Een persoonlijke evaluatie na dertig jaar.” In *die Skriflig* 23/ 91, September (1989).

9 Kuyper’s influence should be read in the wider context of other theological influences, as well as the socio-political history of the Afrikaners. It would perhaps be fair to say that Kuyper himself cannot be held responsible for the brand of Kuyperianism that became a specific contextual theology for Afrikaans churches in South Africa in the first half of the twentieth century.

is its conviction that the whole world and all spheres of society exist under the reign of God in Christ. Christian faith, therefore, does not only have personal significance, but has social transformative power. In the words of Hesselink: "Calvinism can never be accused of having a God who is too small, or a vision that is too narrow ... In contrast to Lutherism's quest for a gracious God, pietism's concern for the welfare of the individual soul, and Wesleyanism's goal of personal holiness, the ultimate concern in the Reformed tradition transcends the individual and his salvation.... The concern is for the realization of the will of God also in the wider realms of state and culture, in nature and in cosmos".¹⁰

One of many attestations to Kuyper's cosmological thinking, is found in the second chapter of his well-known Stone-lectures published as *Calvinism: Six lectures delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton. The L.P. Stone lectures from 1989-1899*.¹¹

In line with this tradition, Kuyper's aim was to provide a theological basis for bringing the whole of reality under the rule of God. He accomplished this by constructing a cosmology in which there is a close analogy between Creator and creation, based on the notion of common grace (*gemeene gratie*). The created order is marked by a rich pluriformity and develops through time according to different particular life-principles. There are God-willed orders of creation like family, state and church that exist in sovereign spheres, but they are held together by God's common grace, which prevents the world from degenerating into chaos. General grace allows for the evolutionary development of life streams inherent to creation. In this way creation, including the different peoples of the world, fulfils its potential under God's reign and to God's glory.¹²

Critique

Dutch theologian W.H. Velema's critique of Kuyper's over-emphasis on general grace is unambiguous: Velema argues that the dialectic relationship between common and special grace is an element of Kuyper's idealistic philosophy and cosmology couched in Calvinistic terms, but not drawing on the intentions of Calvin himself. The only way out of this idealistic system, says Velema, is a radical brake with common grace in order to restore some of Kuyper's Reformed intentions.¹³

This is confirmed by Kees van der Kooi from the Free University in Amsterdam. He refutes Kuyper's claim that he (Kuyper) merely developed Calvin's notion that some Divine indulgence remains beside the total corruption of creation and mankind. "It should be clear, however, that Calvin's point in speaking about general grace is entirely the opposite of Kuyper's. While in Calvin this general grace receives no further attention and the focus remains on mankind's total dependence on God's grace, Kuyper turns his attention to the subject of this common grace."¹⁴ Common grace in fact becomes a broad theory of culture based on an optimistic view of Western society, civilization and scientific achievements.¹⁵

If through common grace God establishes orders of creation such as family, state and church, surely one can further argue that the existence, development and protection of different peoples – each as a separate people according to its own potential and law-stream ("*wetstroom*") –

10 John Hesselink, *On being reformed*. (Servant: Ann Arbor, 1983).

11 Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six lectures delivered in the Theological Seminary at Princeton. The L.P. Stone lectures from 1989-1899*. (New York: Revell, 1899).

12 See Velema, "Kuyper as theologian", p. 58; Willie Jonker, *Die Gees van Christus*. (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1981), pp. 93-94; Cornelis Van der Kooi, "A theology of culture. A critical appraisal of Kuyper's doctrine of common grace." In *Kuyper reconsidered. Aspects of his life and work*, edited by Cornelis van der Kooi and Jan de Bruijn, pp. 98. (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1999).

13 Velema, "Kuyper as theologian", p. 69.

14 Van der Kooi, "A theology of culture.", p. 97-98.

15 Van der Kooi, "A theology of culture.", p. 98.

be seen as the will of God? This is especially relevant if a people, like the Afrikaners, who are Christians and who believe that it is through God's providence that they were planted on the southern tip of Africa to be bearers of the light of the gospel.

It does not require a lot of imagination to see why Kuyper's Neo-Calvinist theology became so influential in Afrikaans South African churches of Dutch origin.¹⁶ His own glowing respect for the Boers who resisted British colonization, and who – inspired by God – trekked into the darkness of Africa to set up republics as a result of their Calvinistic heroism¹⁷, added a very personal dimension to this relationship. Afrikaners reinterpreted their own history as sacred history, analogous to the Israelite people of God. In short, “The blending of Afrikaner ‘sacred history’ and neo-Calvinism with its ‘sovereignty of spheres’ thus provided a powerful ideological base for Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid,” writes John de Gruchy.¹⁸

3.2 Ecclesiology

It is important to note that for Kuyper the institutional (i.e. external) form of the church does not belong to its essence. This implies that the traditional marks of unity, holiness, catholicity and Christian, are marks of the unseen church that will only be realised eschatologically.

The formation of various institutional churches (like in The Netherlands after 1886) is thus no threat to the spiritual unity of the church. In fact, the search for external, institutional unity is a form of “churchism” (*kerkisme*) that is to be resisted. The freedom of people to form their own churches should not be diminished. Differentiation amongst peoples will naturally lead to the development of different institutional churches. “The people amongst whom the church is formed are not the same. They differ according to origin, race, country, region, history, potential and psychological orientation, and also do not stay the same, but go through various stages of development.”¹⁹ Because of this, the differences that separate person from person, had to form a wedge in the unity of the external church. This pluralistic church-formation is “according to my firm conviction a phase of development to which the church should have come.”²⁰

Critique

Willie Jonker, an influential South African systematic theologian in the period after 1960, notes that Kuyper constructs the pluriformity of the church not on Scripture, or the intention of Calvin and the Reformation, but on his evolutionist and organic concept of history. Kuyper, under influence of the nineteenth century individualism and idealism, introduces a subjectivist element into his ecclesiology. Church-formation becomes an issue of personal choice and the exercise of personal freedom. This can lead to the conclusion that it is a normal and God-willed development to establish separate institutional churches for groupings based on culture, psychology, or any other human factor. As Kuyper himself argues, these separate churches in no way detract from

16 As early as 1882, the Rev S.J. du Toit attempted to translate Kuyper's ideas into the political and ecclesial situation at the time. After 1907 post-graduate students chose to attend the Free University in Amsterdam rather than the State University in Utrecht, some of them returned to South Africa as avid Kuyperians. In the Gereformeerde Kerk, Kuyper's ideas were carried forth by J.D. du Toit and H.G. Stoker, professors of theology and philosophy respectively. In the Dutch Reformed Church academics, F.J.M. Potgieter and A.B. du Preez, and church leaders, J.D. Vorster and A.P. Treurnicht, became the most significant proponents of a neo-Calvinistic revival in the 1930's and beyond (see Kinghorn, *Die NG Kerk*, chapter 6).

17 Strauss “Abraham Kuyper, apartheid”, p. 13; Kuiper, “Groen and Kuyper”, p. 78.

18 John W. de Gruchy, *Liberating reformed theology. A South African contribution to an ecumenical debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 27.

19 Abraham Kuyper, *Die gemeene gratie III* (Amsterdam: Hoveker, 1904), p. 223, my translation.

20 Kuyper, *Die gemeene gratie III*, p. 231, my translation.

the unity of the church as a fundamental spiritual reality in Christ.²¹

3.3 Human development

With regard to human and social development, Kuyper was a man of his times. He therefore shared the cultural biases of Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Based on general grace, all people have a natural knowledge of God, and in principle the human race and all nations stand equal before God. This general grace forms the basis and stepping stone for special grace that leads to a higher knowledge of God in Christ. On the one hand, Kuyper follows Calvin by maintaining the unity of humanity based on God's counsel.²² On the other hand, his conception of common grace allows him to see the confusion of the Babel events as setting forth each nation or people according to their own type and law-stream.²³

According to Kuyper, a hierarchy then follows: The first level consist of people (for example, in Africa) where natural or common grace has not yet developed to its full potential. Then there is a second level where one finds a greater impact of common grace, with pockets of developed areas, for example, in India and Japan. Following this, is a level of social systems where special grace dominates. This is the highest level of development where there is a maximum Christian effect on the whole of society. The pivotal examples of this are the European and North American civilizations.²⁴

This differentiation amongst people based on their participation in levels of grace is the hermeneutical key to understand, for example, Kuyper's view of the three children of Noah. They reflect the various developmental levels. The children of Shem received both common and special grace; those of Japhet benefited to a lesser sense from special grace; and the descendants of Ham show a lack of both forms of grace. Therefore, the descendants of Ham are to be temporarily subservient to the other groups until they have reached the same level of development and civilization.²⁵

Critique

Based on the analysis of Roman Catholic scholar, Alexandre Ganoczy, John de Gruchy²⁶ points to the ambiguity of Calvin's life and work. On the one hand stands the "young Calvin" with his positive, evangelical and liberating theology. On the other hand we find the "older Calvin" that shows trends of domination and constriction. The historically first reception of Calvin in SA – and dominant until at least the mid 1970s – was via "imperial Calvinism" that was in essence "fearful of spontaneity, openness, equalities and diversities".²⁷ The neo-Calvinism espoused by Kuyper found public expression in his political activities. Jan de Bruijn argues that Kuyper was a child of European Romanticism and that his Calvinist politics was in part imbued by his romanticising of the glorious Dutch past and a specific brand of Dutch nationalism.²⁸ This nationalism was based

21 Willie D. Jonker, *Die Gees van Christus* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1981), pp. 91-94; Willie D.

Jonker, "Die pluriformiteitsleer van Abraham Kuyper. Teologiese onderbou vir die konsep van aparte kerke vir aparte volksgroepe?" In *die Skriflig* 23/3 (1989): 16-18.

22 Velema, "Kuyper as theolog", p. 66.

23 P.J. Strauss, "Abraham Kuyper, apartheid and the Reformed churches in South Africa in their support of apartheid." *Theological Forum*, XXIII/1, March (1995): 12.

24 See Strauss, "Abraham Kuyper, apartheid", p. 11; and the discussion of the Stone lectures by D.T.

Kuiper, "Groen and Kuyper on the racial issue." In *Kuyper reconsidered. Aspects of his life and work*, edited by Cornelis van der Kooi and Jan de Bruijn, pp. 74-75. Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1999.

25 See Strauss, "Abraham Kuyper, apartheid", p. 14, and the fine analysis by Kuiper, "Groen and Kuyper", pp. 74-78 based on original Kuyper sources.

26 John W. de Gruchy, *Liberating reformed theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p.32.

27 Woltersdorff as quoted by De Gruchy, *Liberating reformed theology*, p. 18.

28 Jan De Bruijn, "Abraham Kuyper as a Romantic." In *Kuyper reconsidered. Aspects of his life and work*,

on a theology that accorded undue weight to “a value of separateness”.²⁹ And because it was embedded in a hierarchical view of civilizations, it paved the way for Afrikaner nationalists to claim legitimate *voogdyskap* (rule over) black people in South Africa as an expression of God’s will, as well as a practice of equal but separate justice. Like in Kuyper’s case, “circumstances claimed victory over doctrine”.³⁰

When these ideas blended with the socio-economic position of the Afrikaner people after 1929,³¹ the scene was set for the development of Kuyper’s (and Calvin’s!) legacy into a theologically guided ideology. This close link between Calvin, volk and church, is quite evident in the journal series, *Koers in Krisis* (“Direction in crisis”) started by Proff HG Stoker and FJM Potgieter in the mid 1930s. In the first editorial they write: “May this work be to the honour of God and the benefit of the volk, and may it conquer the heart of our volk. And may it unite all the Calvinists in South Africa, whatever their church, province or profession, to common Calvinist action in South Africa.”³²

In this manner, Calvin’s legacy became the religious and moral legitimacy of apartheid theology and the policies of separate development after 1948. This is, however not the full picture. There is a second face of Calvin in South Africa to which we return in the article below.

Prof Piet Naudé
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
14 Bird Street
Central
Port Elizabeth 6001
Piet.naude@nmmu.ac.za

edited by Cornelis van der Kooi and Jan de Bruijn, pp. 45-58. (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1999).

29 Botman, “Is blood thicker”, p. 355.

30 Kuiper, “Groen and Kuyper”, p. 81.

31 I refer here to the rapid urbanisation of Afrikaners when both economic depression and severe droughts forced them to turn from an agricultural economy to an industrial one. For this they were not skilled, and they found themselves in an environment dominated by English capital. The well-known Carnegie Commission was set up to investigate the problem and make recommendations. It found that by the early 1930’s about 300 000 Afrikaner people were living in poverty. (A similar study was undertaken for black people in the late 1980s.)

32 HG Stoker and FJM Potgieter, *Koers in Krisis* I, p.xii, 1935 (my translation). I got this reference from the chapter by Robert Vosloo referred to below in part two.