ABRAHAM KUYPER

CALVINISM AS A LIFE SYSTEM

THE STONE LECTURES • FIRSTLECTURE

Susan Weston’s first note: I downloaded this text from www.kuyper.org/stone/lecture1.html and added the headings. The paragraphs are long, but I promise they are very well organized. The Study Guide on the last page may also help you sort through his explanation.

Susan Weston’s second note: Kuyper’s big point is to show that Calvinism is a “life system”, an “all-embracing system of principles, as, rooted in the past, is able to strengthen us in the present and to fill us with confidence for the future.” His proof starts with showing how Calvinism provides a peculiar insight into “the three fundamental relations of all human life: viz., (1) our relation to God, (2) our relation to man, and (3) our relation to the world.” These excerpts show how he explains those three relations.

RELATIONSHIP TO GOD

This was the case with Paganism, which in its most general form is known by the fact that it surmises, assumes and worships God in the creature. This applies to the lowest Animism, as well as to the highest Buddhism. Paganism does not rise to the conception of the independent existence of a God beyond and above the creature. But even in this imperfect form it has for its starting-point a definite interpretation of the relation of the infinite to the finite, and to this it owed its power to produce a finished form for human society. Simply because it possessed this significant starting-point was it able to produce a form of its own for the whole of human life. It is the same with Islamism, which is characterized by its purely anti-pagan ideal, cutting off all contact between the creature and God. Mohammed and the Koran are the historic names, but in its nature the Crescent is the only absolute antithesis to Paganism. Islam isolates God from the creature, in order to avoid all commingling with the creature. As antipode, Islam was possessed of an equally far-reaching tendency, and was also able to originate an entirely peculiar world of human life. The same is the case with Romanism. Here also the papal tiara, the hierarchy, the mass, etc., are but the outcome of one fundamental thought: viz., that God enters into fellowship with the creature by means of a mystic middle-link, which is the Church;—not taken as a mystic organism, but as a visible, palpable and tangible institution. Here the Church stands between God and the world, and so far as it was able to adopt the world and to inspire it, Romanism also created a form of its own for human society. And now, by the side of and opposite to these three, Calvinism takes its stand with a fundamental thought which is equally profound. It does not seek God in the creature, as Paganism; it does not isolate God from the creature, as Islamism; it posits no mediate communion between God and the creature, as does Romanism; but proclaims the exalted thought that, although standing in high majesty above the creature, God enters into immediate fellowship with the creature, as God the Holy Spirit. This is even the heart and kernel of the Calvinistic confession of predestination. There is communion with God, but only in entire accord with his counsel of peace from all eternity. Thus there is no grace but such as comes to us immediately from God. At every moment of our existence, our entire spiritual life rests in God Himself. The “Deo Soli Gloria” was not the starting-point but the result, and predestination was inexorably maintained, not for the sake of separating man from man, nor in the interest of personal pride, but in order to guarantee from eternity to eternity, to our inner self, a direct and immediate communion with the Living God. The opposition against Rome aimed therefore with the Calvinist first of all at the dismissal of a Church which placed itself between the soul and God. The Church consisted not in an office, nor in an independent institute, the believers themselves were the Church, inasmuch as by faith they stood in touch with the Almighty. Thus, as in Paganism, Islamism and Romanism, so also in Calvinism is found that proper, definite interpretation of the fundamental relation of man to God, which is required as the first condition of a real life-system.

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The second objection we have to meet is this: If it is true that every general development form of life must find its starting point in a peculiar interpretation of our relation to God,—how then do you explain the fact that Modernism also has led to such a general conception, notwithstanding it sprang from the French Revolution, which on principle broke with all religion. The question answers itself. If you exclude from your conceptions all reckoning with the Living God just as is implied in the cry, “no God no master,” you certainly bring to the front a sharply defined interpretation of your own for our relation to God. A government, as you yourselves experienced of late in the case of Spain, that recalls its ambassador and breaks every regular intercourse with another power, declares thereby that its relation to the government of that country is a strained relation which generally ends in war. This is the case here. The leaders of the French Revolution, not being acquainted with any relation to God except that which existed through the mediation of the Romish Church, annihilated all relation to God, because they wished to annihilate the power of the Church; and as a result of this they declared war against every religious confession. But this of course very really implied a fundamental and special interpretation of our relation to God. It was the declaration that henceforth God was to be considered as a hostile power, yea even as dead, if not yet to the
heart, at least to the state, to society and to science. To be sure, in passing from French into German hands, Modernism could not rest content with such a bare negation; but the result shows how from that moment it clothed itself in either pantheism or agnosticism, and under each disguise it maintained the expulsion of God from practical and theoretical life, and the enmity against the Triune God had its full course.

Thus I maintain that it is the interpretation of our relation to God which dominates every general life system, and that for us this conception is given in Calvinism, thanks to its fundamental interpretation of an immediate fellowship of God with man and of man with God. To this I add that Calvinism has neither invented nor conceived this fundamental interpretation, but that God Himself implanted it in the hearts of its heroes and its heralds. We face here no product of a clever intellectualism, but the fruit of a work of God in the heart, or, if you like, an inspiration of history. This point should be emphasized! Calvinism has never burned its incense upon the altar of genius, it has erected no monument for its heroes, it scarcely calls them by name. One stone only in a wall at Geneva remains to remind one of Calvin. His very grave has been forgotten. Was this ingratitude? By no means. But if Calvin was appreciated, even in the 16th and 17th centuries the impression was vivid that it was One greater than Calvin, even God Himself, who had wrought here His work. Hence, no general movement in life is so devoid of deliberate compact, none so unconventional in which it spread as this. Simultaneously. Calvinism had its rise in all the countries of Western Europe, and it did not appear, among those nations. because the University was in its van, or because scholars led the people, or because a magistrate placed himself at their head: but it sprang from the hearts of the people themselves, with weavers and farmers, with tradesmen and servants, with women and young maidens; and in every instance it exhibited the same characteristic: viz., strong Assurance of eternal Salvation, not only without the intervention of the Church, but even in opposition to the Church. The human heart had attained unto eternal peace with its God: strengthened by this Divine fellowship, it discovered its high and holy calling to consecrate every department of life and every energy at its disposal to the glory of God: and therefore, when those men or women, who had become partakers of this Divine life, were forced to abandon their faith, it proved impossible, that they could deny their Lord; and thousands and tens of thousands burned at the stake, not complaining but exulting, with thanksgiving in their hearts and psalms upon their lips. Calvin was not the author of this, but God who through His Holy Spirit had wrought in Calvin that which He had wrought in them. Calvin stood not above them, but as a brother by their side, a sharer with them of God's blessing. In this way, Calvinism came to its fundamental interpretation of an immediate fellowship with God, not because Calvin invented it, but because in this immediate fellowship God Himself had granted to our fathers a privilege of which Calvin was only the first to become clearly conscious. This is the great work of the Holy Spirit in history, by which Calvinism has been consecrated, and which interprets to us its wondrous energy.

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RELATIONSHIP TO MAN

This brings us of itself to the second condition, with which, for the sake of creating a life system every profound movement has to comply: viz., a fundamental interpretation of its own touching the relation of man to man. How we stand toward God is the first, and how we stand toward man is the second principal question which decides the tendency and the construction of our life. There is no uniformity among men, but endless multiformity. In creation itself the difference has been established between woman and man. Physical and spiritual gifts and talents cause one person to differ from the other. Past generations and our own personal life create distinctions. The social position of the rich and poor differs widely. Now, these differences are in a special way weakened or accentuated by every consistent life system, and Paganism and Islamism, Romanism as well as Modernism, and so also Calvinism have all taken their stand in this question in accordance with their primordial principle. If, as Paganism contends, God dwells in the creature, a divine superiority is exhibited in whatever is high among men. In this way it obtained its demigods, hero-worship, and finally its sacrifices upon the altar of Divus Augustus. On the other hand, whatever is lower is considered as godless, and therefore gives rise to the systems of caste in India and in Egypt, and to slavery everywhere else, thereby placing one man under a base subjection to his fellowman. Under Islamism, which dreams of its paradise of houries, 8 sensuality usurps public authority, and the woman is the slave of man, even as the kafir is the slave of the Moslim. Romanism, taking root in Christian soil, overcomes the absolute characteristic of distinction, and renders it relative, in order to interpret every relation of man to man hierarchically. There is a hierarchy among the angels of God, a hierarchy in God's Church, and so also a hierarchy among men, leading to an entirely aristocratic interpretation of life as the embodiment of the ideal. Finally Modernism, which denies and abolishes every difference, cannot rest until it has made woman man and man woman, and, putting every distinction on a common level, kills life by placing it under the ban of uniformity. One type must answer for all, one uniform, one position and one and the same development of life; and whatever goes beyond and above it, is looked upon as an insult to the common consciousness. In the same way Calvinism has derived from its fundamental relation to God a peculiar interpretation of man's relation to man, and it is this only true relation which since the 16th century has ennobled social life, If Calvinism places our entire human life immediately before God, then it follows that all men or women, rich or poor, weak or strong, dull or talented, as creatures of God, and as lost sinners, have no claim whatsoever to lord over one another, and that we
stand as equals before God, and consequently equal as man to man. Hence we cannot recognize any distinction among men, save such as has been imposed by God Himself, in that He gave one authority over the other, or enriched one with more talents than the other, in order that the man of more talents should serve the man with less, and in him serve his God. Hence Calvinism condemns not merely all open slavery and systems of caste, but also all covert slavery of woman and of the poor; it is opposed to all hierarchy among men; it tolerates no aristocracy save such as is able, either in person or in family, by the grace of God, to exhibit superiority of character or talent, and to show that it does not claim this superiority for self-aggrandizement or ambitious pride, but for the sake of spending it in the service of God. So Calvinism was bound to find its utterance in the democratic interpretation of life; to proclaim the liberty of nations; and not to rest until both politically and socially every man, simply because he is man, should be recognized, respected and dealt with as a creature created after the Divine likeness.

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RELATIONSHIP TO THE WORLD

The third fundamental relation which decides the interpretation of life is the relation which you bear to the world. As previously stated, there are three principal elements with which you come into touch: viz., God, man and the world. The relation to God and to man into which Calvinism places you being thus reviewed, the third and last fundamental relation is in order: viz., your attitude toward the world. Of Paganism it can be said in general, that it places too high an estimate upon the world, and therefore to some extent it both stands in fear of, and loses itself in it. On the other hand Islamism places too low an estimate upon the world, makes sport of it and triumphs over it in reaching after the visionary world of a sensual paradise. For the purpose in view however we need say no more of either, since both for Christian Europe and America the antithesis between man and the world has assumed the narrower form of the antithesis between the world and the Christian circles. The traditions of the Middle Ages gave rise to this. Under the hierarchy of Rome the Church and the World were placed over against each other, the one as being sanctified and the other as being still under the curse. Everything outside the Church was under the influence of demons, and exorcism banished this demoniacal power from everything that came under the protection, influence and inspiration of the Church. Hence in a Christian country the entire social life was to be covered by the wings of the Church. The magistrate had to be anointed and confessionally bound; art and science had to be placed under ecclesiastical encouragement and censure; trade and commerce had to be bound to the Church by the tie of gilds; and from the cradle to the grave, family life was to be placed under ecclesiastical guardianship. This was a gigantic effort to claim the entire world for Christ, but one which of necessity brought with it the severest judgment upon every life-tendency which either as heretical or as demoniacal withdrew itself from the blessing of the Church. Hence the stake was fit alike for witch and heretic, for in principle both lay under the same ban. And this deadening theory was carried out with iron logic, not from cruelty, nor from any low ambition, but from the lofty purpose of saving the christianized world, i.e., the world as overshadowed by the Church. Escape from the world was the counterpoise in monastic and partly even in clerical orders, which emphasized holiness in the centre of the Church in order to wink the more lightly at worldly excesses without. As a natural result the world corrupted the Church, and by its domination over the world the Church proved an obstacle to every free development of its life.

Thus making its appearance in a dualistic social state, Calvinism has wrought an entire change in the world of thoughts and conceptions. In this also, placing itself before the face of God, it has not only honored man for the sake of his likeness to the Divine image, but also the world as a Divine creation, and has at once placed to the front the great principle that there is a particular grace which works Salvation, and also a common grace by which God, maintaining the life of the world, relaxes the curse which rests upon it, arrests its process of corruption, and thus allows the untrammelled development of our life in which to glorify Himself as Creator 10. Thus the Church receded in order to be neither more nor less than the congregation of believers, and in every department the life of the world was not emancipated from God, but from the dominion of the Church. Thus domestic life regained its independence, trade and commerce realized their strength in liberty, art and science were set free from every ecclesiastical bond and restored to their own inspirations, and man began to understand the subjection of all nature with its hidden forces and treasures to himself as a holy duty, imposed upon him by the original ordinances of Paradise: “Have dominion over them.” Henceforth the curse should no longer rest upon the world itself, but upon that which is sinful in it, and instead of monastic flight from the world the duty is now emphasized of serving God in the world, in every position in life. To praise God in the Church and serve Him in the world became the inspiring impulse, and, in the Church, strength was to be gathered by which to resist temptation and sin in the world. Thus puritanic sobriety went hand in hand with the reconquest of the entire life of the world, and Calvinism gave the impulse to that new development which dared to face the world with the Roman thought: nil humanum a me alienum puto, although never allowing itself to be intoxicated by its poisonous cup.
STUDY GUIDE FOR ABRAHAM KUYPER

Choose just a few words to summarize how Kuyper would fill in the following chart of life systems. I’ve filled in the first box as an example.

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From all of what Kuyper says about Calvinism, choose one sentence that you found especially positive and helpful.

From all of what Kuyper says about Calvinism, choose one sentence that you found most puzzling or disturbing.