

Editorial | *Abraham Kuyper, Troublemaker**

Introduction

Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), newspaper and university founder, pastor, church maker and breaker, and Dutch prime minister, was, truth be told, a troublemaker. Don't get us wrong: He was a true “renaissance man” as at least one, a little overly rosy biography has put it,¹ a man of deep piety and a passionate follower of Jesus Christ, but he also had that quality of driven, singularly gifted men, of alienating those closest to him.² His theology provoked spirited backlash in people like Klaas Schilder, who did not suffer from an inability to express his own feelings.³ In politics, Kuyper alienated rivals, allies, and even the Queen herself, especially after one incident in which Kuyper published Her Majesty's private remarks in his newspaper. The consequences of Kuyper's views on *pillarization*, the idea that modern society should not erase difference but create distinct, meaningful space for differences, created a Dutch education system still much in debate today, and—of course—also became a rallying call for racial segregation in former Dutch colonies such as South Africa. Its specter looms very dark and has led some to conclude that Kuyper's ideas are irredeemably colonialist and racist. Even in his own time, Kuyper became a stand-in for bourgeois capitalist militarism to the socialist activist and political cartoonist Albert Hahn (1877–1918), whose artwork features on the cover of this issue.

Why look at such a man, then? He was sensational, to be sure, but sensational in a kind of small historical way, in his own little context of the Netherlands, itself a sleepy little low country in the north of Europe, one-time global power,

but even then, long past its zenith. Maybe we could justify this tiny exploration if we lived in Holland, if we were all Dutch boys and girls learning our parochial history. But it seems like an odd choice for an English language introduction intended for Christians of faith in North America, a hundred years later, wrestling with questions that seem far removed from Kuyper's world.

We want to make at least four arguments for why Abraham Kuyper is for "such a time as this" (Est. 4:14) in our initial orientation, one biographical, and three more conceptual (that is, about the content of what Kuyper thought and taught). Kuyper is hardly the panacea for faithful Christian cultural and political engagement today in North America, but he is a very solid signpost, a guide, to help us in the increasingly turbulent and treacherous waters of polarized politics and tribal religion.

A Case for Getting to Know Abraham Kuyper

Kuyper's Holland was a Christian nation, or at least that's how they saw themselves. Europe was Christian too; they certainly saw *themselves* that way, as a center of civilization, education, and morality. And at the end of the nineteenth century there seemed to be an overwhelming amount of evidence to prove it: A mass industrialization driven by scientific innovation that quickly overwhelmed and dominated the ancient empires of China, India, and Mesopotamia. European technical and scientific knowledge vastly outstripped their contemporaries, until they were without rival, and until, in fact, they dominated the entire world in an age of empire, of which the Dutch were early and successful enthusiasts. This was the world Kuyper was born into.

Yet something was clearly wrong.

These Christian empires were invested less in the fraternity of humankind under the gospel, than in scrambling for territory, resources, even slaves. The rise of so-called Christian Europe was marked by an uneven piety, to put it kindly, and the results of these Christian nations and their rivalry would be a global cataclysm from which the world would not soon recover. Its story and its collateral carnage would, in fact, dominate the entire century.

There were, in other words, a simultaneous and breathtaking expansion of technology, political power, and economic growth, and a kind of moral and spiritual hollowing out of the family and the nation, a growing disconnect between what people said they believed, and what they did; between what people knew they *ought* to be, and how they really *lived*.

The (European) Christian church served as poor respite. Wrote Kuyper in his early years, "Church life was cold and formal. Religion was almost dead. There

was no Bible in the schools. There was no life in the nation.”²⁴ Or again, “people had been satisfied with [Christian] appearances alone and failed to bring the gospel to the heart,” and connecting it directly to the catastrophe of the Great War (1914–1918), he concludes, that “the sad outcome was that in Europe the torch of division and discord was set alight.”²⁵ But were Europeans not blessed nations under God? Was not Christian Europe, at the turn of the (twentieth) century, a chosen people, to bring light to the nations? Hardly, wrote Kuyper in disgust on the eve of that War. “The genuinely devout in every one of them [Christian nations] had not lagged a bit in baptizing their country’s cause as the Lord’s,”²⁶ the result of which, in Kuyper’s mind, was a moral and material collapse that would consume the world.

Sound familiar? If you are American, it should. The globe is getting awfully crowded for America’s superpower ambitions that have run unchecked since the end of the Cold War, with the “rise of the rest” as Fareed Zakaria puts it.⁷ America has stumbled economically, geopolitically, and politically, and all the while massive new powers are pulling huge populations of people into the global economy. And morally? Well, one hardly need get partisan to point out a sitting president paying hush money to porn stars. Even (especially?) if you are an evangelical Christian in the United States today, the fissure running down the center of what was once American evangelicalism is now a chasm so wide it is doubtful it can be crossed even by its own people. To say that traditional religion in America is in crisis borders on cliché.

Yet you could go read your European history at the turn of the twentieth century and find in it the same ideas and language as you would about America at the turn of the twenty-first: a chosen people, blessed by God, bringing light to the nations. All the while, the evidence of its decline mounts. All the while, the world holds its breath as new, bellicose powers arise; and we hope to avoid the worst of our history and our inclinations.

“You cannot step in the same river twice,” the ancient Greeks knew. Though this historical analogy is far from perfect, the point is simply that Abraham Kuyper matters *for such a time as this* because the crises of our times are, in a perennial way, reminiscent of the crises of Kuyper’s. He, too, lived through the turn of a very violent century marked by extremely radical change. Our attitudes of history can run so narcissistic sometimes that we forget that as significant as the digital revolution, space flight, and iPhones may be, the telegram, the internal combustion engine, the electric light, and fixed nitrogen transformed a world at a speed and in a fashion that would take the breath away of even the most ambitious Silicon Valley entrepreneur.

Abraham Kuyper, in other words, was not just a man of uncommon insight, piety, and ambition, but he was also a product of his time, maybe in the most crucial sense a time of massive upheaval and global change. And in that time, he founded newspapers, churches, schools, and served as prime minister of a minor European state, all the while clinging to his passion for his Christian religion. We would expect such a wide-ranging man to have made mistakes, maybe bad ones, but we might also want to sit at his feet, to see how he held Scripture in one hand, and his times in the other, and how he read them together in pursuit of this same Jesus we call Lord today.

World-and-Life-Views: “Every Square Inch”

Abraham Kuyper loved Calvinism. We might even characterize his passion for Calvinism as unusual; many Calvinists today try to appear as nonthreatening, beer drinking, bearded hipsters. Kuyper was none of those things, but his passion for Calvinism as “a true world and life system” was undeniable.

Kuyper loved Calvinism not for some special genius of John Calvin, but because he thought that in Calvinism the truest teaching of the Christian gospel came through. In that, Calvinism represented to Kuyper the fullest meaning of a *catholic gospel*, universal good news. The “promiscuity” of this gospel, as one of Kuyper’s favorite confessions, the Canons of Dort put it, is universal because it calls us to obedience in *every single area* of life, and that the good news itself is not just for human kind but also for *all of creation*.

Kuyper captured with this concept of worldview the fact that people really do *believe* things, and that while we may not even be aware of what those beliefs are, they function in a real way to control our behavior, attitudes, and ultimately the whole of our lives. Kuyper is sometimes criticized here for being too intellectual, as though beliefs are just ideas, concepts, things educated people read about and debate. But this reads Kuyper and his blue-collar theology wrong: Beliefs are about what is in our *hearts*, about what we *love*, not (just) what we think. A belief is really only proper and basic if it gets to the heart of how we think things really are, if it shapes and is shaped by the things we would give our lives for.

That is what Kuyper meant by worldview. And it was not just something religious people have.

Conforming such a worldview to the Christian gospel was one of his lifelong tasks. The task for Kuyper was not creating a worldview, *ex nihilo*, but rather disciplining our already existing worldviews to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We all have such basic beliefs and desires long before we get into the business of theoriz-

ing or praying about them. Christian worldview, for Kuyper, was an extension of the psalmist's prayer, to test our hearts and to see if there is any offensive way in us (cf. Ps. 139:23–24). In this respect, Kuyper anticipated nearly half a century beforehand the postmodernist impulse that there is *always* some belief system or desire underneath knowledge, that there can be no neutral way of knowing.

But he also went beyond the clever deconstructions of the postmodernists. Kuyper not only argued such belief systems and desires persisted, but also that *love, trust, and obedience* to some principle or power was fundamental to the human condition. We trust and love God, or some created thing, ourselves included. For Kuyper, this was no mere intellectual project, it was a matter of faith. Calvinism, he thought, was the most consistent and faithful Christian world-and-life-view, concerned with *all of life*, and all of what God is owed. H. Evan Runner, a later twentieth-century disciple of Kuyper, would say simply in his favorite phrase, “life is religion.”

Confident Pluralism: Loving Faithful Institutions

A radical kind of social project emerges from the logical conclusions of Kuyper's worldview argument. If knowledge and desire are never neutral, and if all of life is claimed by Jesus Christ—intellectual, emotional, blue collar, white collar, and so on—then how can the Church go about discipling people under this radical, God's-kingdom-oriented vision?

Here is the worldview that has launched a thousand Christian institutions, of which Kuyper and his heirs built many. By far, the most enduring and all-encompassing Protestant Christian social, educational, and political organizations have been built with this worldview, working to *integrate* the kingdom of God with the work of their hands. Other Christian social visions exist, to be sure, but they usually either elevate some form of work and ministry (pastoral ministry, for example) or subsume the Christian work of business, art, or politics, as a *means* to the conversion of hearts and minds. The cosmic scope of Kuyper's theology meant Christian farmers praying about how to sow and reap under the call of Christ (as in the Christian Farmers Federation), or Christian laborers praying and practicing steel-form construction as obedience to Christ and his kingdom (as in the Christian Labour Association of Canada).

It was a key argument of Kuyper that all vocations, trades, and practices have buried within them habits and beliefs that either conform to or react against the kingship of Jesus Christ (thesis or antithesis). The usual complaint is the so-called neutral work of science or math, where to the modern mind it is unclear how *faithful* Christian's work on linear algebra differs meaningfully from the

hedonist atheist. The math, as they say, is the math. Bringing worldview into it does not change it one bit, or if it does, not for the better. What is missed in these complaints is that *already persisting* worldviews behind modern mathematics and science, presumptions about the knowability of the universe, the logical, repetitious, and discoverable nature of reality, none of which are the natural or necessary conclusions of a randomly generated universe. Laws like “do not steal” seem religious in a way in which laws like those of thermodynamics are not. But that is only because we are busy trading off the religious past of the great scientific minds of history, who bequeathed to us a scientific method charged with *trust* in a kind of universe suspiciously laden with wonder, goodness, and discoverability.

So if, as Kuyper said, “not one square inch” (not even math!) is unclaimed by Christ, then we must get busy building the kind of institutions, intergenerational conversations, that will foster the discipleship that Christ demands. We must have a *public faith*, as some have said,⁸ one which is not simply about the piety of prayer closets and Sunday mornings, but a faith as cosmic as the redemption of Jesus Christ.

And so, we must also practice what legal theorist John Inazu might call confident pluralism,⁹ a public practice of faith which deliberately and unapologetically advances our understanding of Christ’s kingdom, a faith lived out loud, in public, and with others who may not necessarily share it.

Inazu does not come to his term accidentally, and it elicits the third and final area we think makes the study of Kuyper necessary for our day: The problem of living together amidst deep difference. If Christians are living their convictions out loud, what happens when Christians disagree, or—more to the point—what happens when Christians, atheists, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and so on, of all tribes and persuasions, live *their* faith out loud? Pluralism in Kuyper’s day looked like Protestants and Catholics having separate school systems. Pluralism in our day looks like Muslims and Jews having family courts, libertarian capitalism and radical ecology, and the now ever-present Muslim headscarf.

Are we still so sure about all this pluralism?

Can We Live Together? The Point of Kuyper’s Pluralism

Kuyperian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff writes in *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* that it is “often said, for instance, that everyone has a ‘set of presuppositions’ or a ‘perspective on reality’ to bring to a theoretical inquiry. That may be true. But saying such things cannot be the end of the matter. It must at best be the beginning.”¹⁰

Like Wolterstorff, we in the twenty-first century are probably more aware than most in human history of the huge array of rival presuppositions, or perspectives on reality, that people and cultures bring. But also, like Wolterstorff, we know that such diversity is at best a beginning, a context, within which we live, not an end in itself. How to weigh this potpourri of pluralism, some of which seems dangerous and unsettling? How, to put it to the point, can a Christian live amidst the kind of wide diversity it would simply call sin in its own home? Can such a peaceful settlement really exist between religious rivals that, especially under a Kuyperian system, we know are not simply at odds about a *piece of life*, but—in a sense—*all of life*?

Here Kuyper advanced what his students have come to call *principled pluralism*, a kind of constitutional arrangement for politics which places principled and procedural limits on pluralism, but which does not demand we all agree “on why” (as Jacques Maritain famously put it). This is also the cornerstone of what has been called Christian social democracy, or what Kuyperian political philosopher Jonathan Chaplin calls the Christian diversity state.¹¹ It is probably ironic that this has ended up being one of Kuyper’s more enduring legacies, a way to imagine peaceful politics amidst radically diverse world-and-life-views, when he was himself such a passionate champion of Calvinistic politics and religion as the only sure path of obedience and prosperity. But it is not accidental, because while Kuyper, like others after him, would not give “one inch” on what they owed to Christ, they also recovered and rearticulated a Christian vision for political life beyond tribal polarization and toward an overlapping set of principles and procedures for the common good. And Kuyper did so *for specifically Calvinist reasons*, a pattern of theology and philosophy that we could do much worse than study to understand and apply in our own day. Ultimately, Kuyper believed that the vitality of a nation and its common life was very much a reflection of its inner spiritual life; a two-way street, out of which either renewal or decline would surely come.

For Such a Time as This

Abraham Kuyper can seem very contemporary when we read him, and it is our argument that he is a wonderful model for us partly for that reason. There is a great deal we could cover in talking through the work and life of the man Kuyper, not least because of the many new English language translations of his primary works like *Common Grace*, *Pro Rege*, *On the Church*, *On Islam*, and so on.¹² He was an uncommonly productive man, both in writing, speaking, and in movement and institution building.

Yet as we read many of Kuyper’s best intentions in the pages ahead, we must therefore also remember that as contemporary as he may sound, he is also—for us—a man out of time. And he was also a Calvinist, and so all too aware that his best efforts were often marked with the depredations of sin. We will see those echoes too.

The point, at the end, is not to paint a portrait of a saint, but of a man, a sometime crank, who nonetheless worked with “fear and trembling” to bring the whole of life, including his own, under the lordship of Jesus Christ. In that effort, he was far from perfect, but then, so are we. And so, in that project, and in that work, we are all co-laborers in “the fields of the Lord,”¹³ and it is in that spirit that we invite you to explore the life and legacy of Abraham Kuyper.

—Jessica Joustra and Robert Joustra

Notes

- * This editorial is an adaptation of the introduction to a forthcoming volume with Intervarsity Press on Abraham Kuyper’s *Lectures on Calvinism* (2021). It is published here with permission.
1. James Edward McGoldrick, *God’s Renaissance Man: Abraham Kuyper* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2000).
 2. James Bratt, the author of the definitive English biography of Abraham Kuyper, writes that Kuyper was “a great man, but not a nice one.” James Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), xxii.
 3. A fine example of that response now exists in a new translation in English, with a foreword by Richard Mouw. Klaas Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, trans. William Helder and Albert H. Oosterhoff (Hamilton, ON: Lucerna CRTS Publications, 2016).
 4. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), iii.
 5. Abraham Kuyper, *Pro Rege: Living Under Christ’s Kingship*, vol. 3, ed. John Kok with Nelson D. Kloosterman, trans. Albert Gootjes (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 256.
 6. James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 370.
 7. Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World: Release 2.0* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012).

8. Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011).
9. John Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving Through Deep Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).
10. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (1984; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 22.
11. Jonathan Chaplin, “Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Diversity: From ‘Liberal Pluralism’ to ‘Christian Pluralism,’” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 143–75. Jonathan’s magisterial work on a Kuyperian and Dooyeweerdian political theory cannot pass us by without a recommendation: Jonathan Chaplin, *Herman Dooyeweerd: Christian Philosopher of State and Civil Society* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016).
12. See www.abrahamkuyper.com.
13. As one favorite phrase of Kuyperian Calvin Seerveld put it, the title of an edited anthology of his work. Craig Bartholomew, ed., *In the Fields of the Lord: A Calvin Seerveld Reader* (Carlisle, UK: Piquant, 2000).