

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat

James D. Bratt

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For those wishing for a comprehensive English biography of the Dutch icon Abraham Kuyper, it has arrived in this recent installment in the Eerdmans Library of Religious Biography series.

As recently as three decades ago, one could only access a few English works that charted the life of Abraham Kuyper. Among those few were: Frank Vandenberg's *Abraham Kuyper: A Biography* (1960; reprinted 1978); McKendree Langley's 1984 *The Practice of Political Spirituality*; or *Let Christ Be King: Reflection on the Life and Times of Abraham Kuyper* by Louis Praamsma (1985; out of print but available as a pdf at http://www.reformationalpublishingproject.com/pdf_books/Scanned_Books_PDF/LetChristBeKing.pdf). In these monographs, criticism was left mainly to Kuyper's critics: The biographers were unfailingly adulatory.

Then a spate of works appeared at the turn of the last century such as Peter Heslam's *Creating a Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism*, James Bratt's *Centennial Reader* and John Bolt's 2001 *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*. Each of those more recent works served to furnish the Anglophonic world with more direct access to Kuyper and offered some constructive criticism. Despite the scarcity of reliable biography, the life of Abraham Kuyper loomed large, both in effect and in urban legend.

Now, historian James Bratt has compiled a readable and informed biography of the Dutch Christian leader whose name has become nearly synonymous with a Christian worldview. Straddling hagiography and criticism, Bratt presents a balanced, fair, and

accurate (sorry to lob the motto of a news organ!) portrayal of a monumental figure. It is well-seasoned, comprehensive, exceptionally well-written, and it serves to fill the gaps for those who wish to know more about the prolific Dutch leader, statesman, and writer.

Bratt establishes his purpose from the outset as not necessarily to provide an after-the-fact “systematization” (xx). Rather, he hopes to provide a biography that “watches as the various pieces of the whole emerge, as now one and now another waxes, then wanes, only to come out again at a later date, perhaps reshaped and relocated. Good biography is contextual ...” (xx). He begins by tracing Kuyper’s childhood years and education. The child of the manse, Kuyper had his own conversion to undergo. Along the way, his wife played a large role in calling him back to the faith of his fathers. He was also influenced by strands of Dutch pietism, continental rationalism, and British evangelicalism, along with a variety of pietistic movements.

Bratt rightly accentuates the mentoring of Groen van Prinsterer, helpfully drawing from Groen’s own writings as well as from the over five hundred letters (71) he sent to Kuyper. Along the way, Bratt realizes also the influence of Calvin, of course, along with John a Lasco, Althusius (133), Bilderdijk, and others from within the Reformed tradition.

This fine biography further charts Kuyper’s role in forming a denomination, a political party, a newspaper, and a university. Few theologians will ever match that resume for productivity, at least in key sectors. Bratt, moreover, does not hesitate to discuss the emotional depressions, the inner struggles, and the serial disruptions with other leaders of Abraham Kuyper’s day. This is a sober and well-informed treatise that, with such realism, makes the accomplishments of Kuyper all the more believable.

Of interest in this is also Bratt’s discussion of Kuyper’s views of culture, art, war, race, international relations, and the future. Bratt also highlights Kuyper’s zest for hiking and exploration, even comparing him to a proto-modernist in his recreational pursuits (252)—certainly an insight into the man who was so intense.

One of the more interesting chapters in this biography focuses on his interaction and visits with Americans. Delivering the Stone Lectures at Princeton in 1898 provided Kuyper with the opportunity to speak in numerous locales and witness prophetically to American Christians in October of that year. Along the way, the Dutch statesman also met with American business, political, labor, and educational leaders, in addition to pastors and theologians. Kuyper warned the American churches about the haunting specter of modernism and unbelief. At the same time, he reviled the “hypnosis of the dogma of Evolution ... under which our nineteenth century is dying away” (284). Kuyper’s endorsement of Democratic presidential candidates, in part, contributes to the subtitle of this biography, although Bratt is correct to point out Kuyper’s support for the Hamiltonian, Republican strand. In his own nation, Kuyper identified himself as a “Christian Democrat,” but the queen worried about his republican first principles.

From reading this biography, thanks to the skillful weaving of the author, one is also acquainted with Kuyper’s own writings. Many of his speeches, books, and essays are excerpted and included at appropriate junctures in this work. These add fabric to the narrative and acquaint the reader with the authentic voice of Kuyper. Also adding to the

strength of this volume is a historian's contextualizing. For example, Bratt's review of other Victorian leaders' births (246) illustrates that many key thinkers were born around the time of Kuyper. Bratt also not only consistently relates Kuyper to the Calvinistic tradition but also compares him to the secular tradition of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Darwin. Bratt's final chapter—another of the finest—seeks to assess the legacies of Kuyper, even while it notes the mixed harvest within his own family, church, and nation.

Bratt's work, sound as it is, occasionally lets a little of its own context slip. References to Kuyper's endorsing the preferential option of the poor (226) and Kuyper's caveats about "campaign financing" (277), for example, sound a tad anachronistic, even if Kuyper possessed proleptic vision. It is also questionable that progressives would find much to love about Kuyper. Yet more dubious is that, rightly interpreted, Kuyper thought Darwinism to be as meritorious as Bratt depicts (285). However, those minor ideological slips should not mar the impression left. Such an otherwise fine biography of Kuyper should not be sufficient to propagandize that Kuyper was definitively, based merely on the assertions herein, really a quite modern, proevolutionist, leftist community organizer.

Bratt also chronicles the rise and decline of Kuyper as elected politician. Kuyper's organizational abilities led to his role as Prime Minister in 1901. He immediately faced a range of local and global challenges. Kuyper hoped to win a second term in 1905 but was narrowly defeated. To lick his wounds, he set off in virtual Rooseveltian character for a lengthy world tour. His keen observations from that grand voyage were published in a large volume, but Bratt sees this trek as but the latest in a line of recuperative retreats. Upon Kuyper's return, he sought to recapture his earlier political influence, but the party tides had moved on. Kuyper's resilience and his retreats are well chronicled in this biography, which shows that Kuyper was not anti-Semitic, had some appreciation for Islamic education, was resolutely antisocialist (at least when Russia was concerned), and was not very progressive on apartheid.

This helpful biography is written as if a grandson discovered his own grandfather after not knowing him personally—not glossing over the weaknesses but neither exploiting them to the detriment of the elder. Bratt explores all the papers, all the scrapbooks in the attic, and all the tributes, filtering carefully as he writes. This is biography "warts and all," but it is also sober and appreciative. Upon completion, one better understands the real Abraham Kuyper. For an age that craves authenticity—or at least thinks it does—this fine biography is a real contribution.

—David W. Hall

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