

## Abraham Kuyper – an anachronism whilst he lived, forgotten in his generation but speaking to our today

Abraham Kuyper [1] (b.1837, d.1920) was described in a recent publication *‘as one of those rare intellectuals who actually led a popular movement. He thought it not enough just to articulate a worldview but built the organisations needed to implement it.’* He is variously described as a theologian, philosopher, minister, politician, newspaper editor, educational innovator, reformer and statesman. He founded a university, founded two newspapers (in which he authored thousands of articles on politics, literature, science and art), founded a political party and broke from the State religion in forming a religious denomination. He lectured famously in the United States and served notably as prime minister of the Netherlands from 1901 to 1905. However, up until three years ago I had never heard of Kuyper despite having previously spent large amounts of time studying the period in which he lived, only encountering him and the impressiveness of his writing as an aside whilst researching for my MA dissertation. After turning over a few scholarly stones, it became of great interest to me as to why there was a renewed contemporary interest in his work with the first full length biography of his life appearing in 2013, a new organisation being formed in 2011 to perform modern translations of his work and in Princeton University forming a centre dedicated to his study. Given this “Renaissance-Man” persona, it was even more remarkable to me that he had been virtually ignored in the literature. In this article, we look at why it should be that this man seems to have so much to say to our own age when he disappeared so quickly without a proper epitaph from his own.

Simply put, Kuyper had become an uncool anachronism to his generation simply because he was a protestant intellectual arguing against the secular programme of the French Revolution which had become the *de facto* political undercurrent of European philosophical and political thought. He had founded the ARP (the *Anti-Revolutionary Party*) and the Christian Free University of Amsterdam as Liberal Christianity was abandoning orthodoxy for new “modern” reinterpretations of the scriptures that accommodated them to “scientific” Darwinism and as orthodox Christianity forsook mainstream academia and cultural engagement altogether making instead for their Fundamentalist ghettos. He was arguing for divine creation in the Brave New World of Darwinism where Humans crawling as Animals from the primordial slime of chaos and chance provided the irresistible elixir of emancipation from divine authority. He had no friends left that would join arms with him in the struggle for intellectual respectability for faith in the public square and he was eclipsed almost as soon as he died. However, no sooner than the ink of his protagonists was drying on the new secular humanism’s grandly titled manifesto *Die Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung* (trans. ‘*The Scientific View of the World*’), the same intellectual engine of Europe descended into Nazism and across the world spawned bloody communist revolutions, dictatorships that killed their own peoples, even to in our present an Ortega of Nicaragua, ‘*autophagic capitalism decorated with the bloodthirsty wreckage of the rotting offal of [Marxist] modernity*’. Thus, the century that had begun with enormous optimism ended with a dark, cynical and pessimistic despair about the ability of humanity to better itself.

It is my contention that the renewed interest in Kuyper is in part fuelled by the contemporary “post-modern” search for a coherent “post-secularism” to address this

vacuum of culture, what might be called “*a new search for meaning*” – human beings that lack souls are realising they are missing that which makes them authentically human. Kuyper is thus sometimes conceived of as “post-modern” a century before Jean-Francois Lyotard’s famous work of 1979 *La Condition postmoderne* that brought the term to mainstream academic and cultural attention. Post-modernism places the *whole experience* of the individual, intellectual and emotional, at the heart of knowledge about the world. Facts are not naked and bare stimuli independent of our perception (viz. objectivity) but are mediated to us by the wider web of our understanding (viz. subjectivity). Thus, historically, it has been easy for post-modernism to shake hands with “relativism” – *you have things that are true for you, I have things that are true for me, but nothing is simply “true”*. This synthesis we find easily across popular culture having been canonised during the 1980s in the work of philosophers like the late Richard Rorty but Kuyper is far more like Rorty’s contemporary and one-time nemesis, Simon Blackburn of Cambridge University who argued for a “*principled pluralism*”. Whereas Rorty on his principles, was unable to condemn a Nazi prison guard, Blackburn describes that as “moral failure” calling to mind Aristotle’s maxim, “*if our ethics lead us to condone murder, there is something wrong with our ethics*”.

Most of us would instinctively agree with that and that is what will arrest you about Kuyper’s work, freedom does not imply the absence of boundaries and he erects an impressive scaffolding for a thoroughly modern but orthodox, Christian account of reality. He embraced “modernity” (the use of science and technology) but rejected State orchestrated uniformity (viz. “modernism”). Likewise, his political premiership was known for its tolerance and mediation with the British during the Boer War, in stark contrast to the accusations before he took office of “theocratic designs” for the Flemish nation. He argues

for intellectual freedom and the right to be considered heretical *without* embracing the heretical and in doing so clearly articulates a message of tolerance for Western culture at its present juncture, a place of focused intolerance and inimical polarisation. We learn that the healthy society is a diverse and authentically pluralistic one, not the politically correct one that like a modern-day Catholic Inquisition will demote me for private social media posts, sack me for stands of conscience and jail me for dissent. He rejects that state-imposed uniformity, particularly when that uniformity is justified in the name of social justice and equality as is becoming increasingly prevalent in a monoglottal Western culture. He will dare to challenge my “identity politics”, be they race or gender, without a contra-accusation of “hate speech”. He says I may disagree with you but that does not mean I hate you. His passionate anti-revolutionary spirit informs us that it is *not* acceptable in the public square to equate my verbiage with “violence” and thus *physical* violence becomes an acceptable response from you to me, the snowflakes are truly melted.

He, above all, presents to us intellectually a society that preserves its moral conscience by properly constraining scientific naturalism, refusing to deny the aspects of our humanity that reach beyond the lab-coat and the test-tube. I am a philosopher of science and believe in empirical science and rationality, but there is more to human life than simply answering the questions that natural science can formulate and then answer (*viz.* “scientism”). It is the same thought that the philosopher Wittgenstein had 12 years after the death of Kuyper at the height of scientific positivism, “[*this*] madness [*springs*] from *irreligiousness*”. I commend his work to you; you will not be disappointed.

## Further Reading

This is an abbreviated version of the full conference paper which can be found at:

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325807212\\_Abraham\\_Kuyper\\_Culture\\_and\\_Art](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325807212_Abraham_Kuyper_Culture_and_Art)

James D. Bratt, 'Introduction - Abraham Kuyper, His Life and Work' in *Abraham Kuyper - A Centennial Reader*, (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 1-16.

Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1898), Kindle edition.

Michael Macneil, *Feeling Good About Truth* (Conference Paper, Dublin: May 2019), DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.18266.39362](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.18266.39362)