

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

Abraham Kuyper¹ (b.1837, d.1920) is 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.*”² 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 States³ and served notably as prime minister of the Netherlands from 1901 to 1905.

Significantly, for the purposes of this essay, there was an increasing interest in Kuyper in the second half of the 20th century perhaps owing to the influence of the most influential Kuyperian in the Anglophone world at that time, Cornelius Van Til⁴. Van Til held advanced philosophical and theological degrees from Princeton and joined J Gresham-Machen and other faculty members who resigned from Princeton over the Auburn Affirmation to found Westminster Theological Seminary (WTS). His trenchant philosophical

¹ This is a common but anglicised spelling of his name. More correctly, the Dutch spelling was Kuijper and this is occasionally seen in citations.

² Bratt, J. D. (1999). Introduction - Abraham Kuyper, His Life and Work. In J. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper - A Centennial Reader* (pp. 1-16). Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, p.2

³ ‘Lectures on Calvinism’, Stone Lectures, Princeton University: 1898.

⁴ Rushdoony, R. (2013 (1949)). *Van Til and the Limits of Reason* (Kindle ed.). Vallecito: Ross House., loc. 185. Rushdoony (cited here) was one of the first to use Van Til’s work as the basis of an entire sociological reform programme which became known as Christian Reconstructionism. Rushdoony considered himself and Van Til within the “Kuyperian school” of philosophy. A revealing insight into Van Til can be found in the tribute article in *Christianity Today* (December 30, 1977), he died at 91 in 1987.

critique of modernism influenced a generation of Reformed philosophers and scholars during his forty-three-year tenure at WTS. Van Til is sometimes conceived of as a Kuyperian and new Kuyper's work very well, reading them in the original Dutch and taking some of the key philosophical formulations of Kuyper and using them in his own critique. The interest in Kuyper has heightened in the contemporary period with a new organisation being formed in 2011 to perform modern translations of his work⁵. Princeton also formed a centre dedicated to his work and remarkably, the first full length biography of his life appeared in 2013⁶. I argue that this revival of interest in Kuyper is directly correlated with his deconstruction of modernism which we examine at length. I believe he anticipated what 21st century cultural historians are now referring to in our contemporary period as an age of "autophagic capitalism"⁷ decorated with the bloodthirsty wreckage of the "rotting offal of [Marxist] modernity"⁸. I make the case that Kuyper is speaking again to us because he spoke of the very same cultural tension that characterises today, it is between the aggressive scientism of our age, crass fundamentalisms⁹ and an increasing realisation of the need for a coherent post-secularism beyond the "modern pantheism [and] Paganism"¹⁰ of modern cultural pluralism. Specifically, and unusually for a Calvinist, Art held an elevated position in Kuyper's cultural philosophy and is considered as an exemplary case as to how his philosophy was applied to a culture.

⁵ Abraham Kuyper Translation Society

⁶ Bratt, J. D. (2013), *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*. Grand Rapid, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans

⁷ McVicar, M. (2015). *Christian Reconstruction - R J Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, p.230

⁸ McVicar (2015), p.230; McGrath, A. E. (1996). *A Passion for truth - the intellectual coherence of evangelicalism*. Leicester: Apollos, pp182-183.

⁹ Bratt (1999), p3

¹⁰ Kuyper (1898), p.26

Kuyper emerged to prominence within and in stark opposition to the new Liberalism that had come to dominate the mainstream universities during the second half of the 19th century. This Liberalism had been inspired by the French revolution, German “Higher Criticism” of the Bible and a Darwinian view of Humanity¹¹. In the closing years of his life, twentieth century Europe had descended into the chaos of the Balkan wars and then the First World War, the optimism of utopian Liberalism quickly dying to be replaced by a militant totalitarianism, atheistic in its red Bolshevik and pantheistic in its brown Nazi forms. He was to write in 1914, *“The misery that is now sweeping the world shows the bankruptcy of all scientific, socio-political, and diplomatic striving.”*¹² Totalitarianism had its philosophical basis in a socio-political application of Darwinism and Nietzsche’s phenomenology. Kuyper saw in Nietzsche *“the rising sun to the up and coming generation of Germany...today everything revolves around Nietzsche”*. Kuyper quotes Nietzsche that it is God and His Christ that are the enemies of human progress and that liberty from God is true freedom, *“This God has died. To you, higher man, this God was the greatest danger. But...now...the higher human becomes – Master.”*¹³

Thus, Kuyper writes in the context of the Darwinist *Zeitgeist* that was understood as the project to dethrone the Christian God of the West. Whereas Nietzsche had pushed idealism to the extreme and inspired Nazism, atheistic modernism spawned Marxism and had also expressed itself philosophically in the new empiricism of Russell and Moore. They gave birth to analytic philosophy that was distinctively concerned with the proper use of

¹¹ Bahnsen, G. (1995). *Introduction to the Apologetic Method of Cornelius Van Til*. Audio tape series ASV5/GB1763. Covenant Media Foundation, <http://www.cmfnow.com/>

¹² Bratt (2013), p.369

¹³ Nietzsche, F. *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, vol. IV, pp.77, 130ff

language (“analysis”) that was to prove far more pervasive and influential during the remainder of the 20th century becoming the dominant philosophical school in the Anglo-American schools. A fundamental, and some would say dominant emphasis of the school in its early period was a rejection of “metaphysics” as “non-sense” meaning *any* religious account of humanity and its origins was indeed, dismissed as just that, nonsense. In contrast, Kuyper, in one of his most famous quotes in his inaugural address to the Free University of Amsterdam which he had founded, stood in direct opposition to the assumptions and practice of the analytic school:

no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over *all*, does not cry ‘Mine!’¹⁴

We shall understand later the full import of this statement when we consider the foundation of Kuyper’s cultural philosophy but it is enough to say at this point that Kuyper identifies precisely what Russell’s analytic philosophy was intended to achieve – logical atomism and the removal of the need for God as the foundation of knowledge. Philosophy was not to be concerned with answering “big questions” but in analysing and clearly stating them¹⁵. Russell’s first major project was to remove the mystical from mathematics; the analytic school of philosophy and its children, positivism and naturalism were the major projects to ensure God was locked out permanently¹⁶. Russell had become a major personality within a group of philosophers that were known as the Vienna Circle during the 1920 and 1930s originating the philosophical movement known as *logical positivism* later

¹⁴ Kuyper, A. (1998 (1880)). *Sphere Sovereignty*, p.488

¹⁵ Ayer, A. J. (1952 (1946)). *Language, Truth and Logic* (2nd ed.). New York: Dover. Printed back matter.

¹⁶ Russell (1991), *History of Western Philosophy*. London: George Allen & Unwin, pp.783-789

stated in English most forcibly by Ayer¹⁷. As mentioned above, its aim was to purge philosophy and hence culture generally of metaphysical contamination, i.e. any talk of God or religion, ethics or aesthetics. The influence of positivism is hard to overstate, and it dominated much Western academic discourse across the science and humanities until the early 1960s. Its putative heir was “methodological naturalism” (MN) that currently dominates the mainstream Anglophone academic world. Naturalism prejudices that God does not exist and so any explanation of phenomena involving God is excluded on principle, “*atheism is obligatory in the absence of any [scientific] evidence for God’s existence.*”¹⁸. Atheism when logically developed terminates at the extreme naturalism found in Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens and Harris¹⁹, it produces the cultural position known as *scientism*. Scientism variously holds that only science can answer questions about the world but more seriously for culture at large, the only questions *worth* asking are those that science can answer²⁰.

To naturalism, its immediate consequence is a rarefaction and trivialising of human aesthetic experience in terms of evolutionary instinct and basic psychological processes. So, for example in the analytic philosophy of art we can see assertions such as, “pictures trigger certain *natural* capacities”²¹ (emphasis original) and that aesthetic attributes are “*objective properties of the artworks in question*”²². In contrast, Kuyper was emphatic that although

¹⁷ Ayer, A. J. (1952 (1946)). *Language, Truth and Logic* (2nd ed.). New York: Dover

¹⁸ Scriven, M. (2003). ‘The Presumption of Atheism’. In L. Pojman, *Philosophy of Religion - An Anthology*, Waveland Press., pp346-348.

¹⁹ Plantinga, A. (2012). *Where the conflict really lies - Science, Religion and Naturalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp.ix-xiv

²⁰ James E. Taylor, “The New Atheists” in *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/n-atheis/>, 05/04/2016.

²¹ Carrol, N. (1999). *Philosophy of Art - a contemporary introduction*. London: Routledge, p.45. Emphasis original.

²² Carrol, N. (1999), p.192ff

each cultural sphere has “scientific” principles that were discoverable by naked reason, the knowledge was not “*value free*” or “*brute facts*” about the world²³. Analytic philosophy demands, indeed is predicated upon, such strong conceptualisation of brute and objective facts²⁴. Kuyper, with his substantial but not uncritical borrowing from German Idealism and the Romantic schools, positioned the person at the centre of cultural discourse and is sometimes seen as anticipating a postmodern position a century before Lyotard’s sustained critique of universalising modernism²⁵. Thus, it is intuitively suspected that Kuyper’s position and the naturalistic position are the conceptual and methodological antithesis of one another and on closer examination, we shall confirm this is the case.

His radical cultural critique is first stated publicly in his address of 1869, “*Uniformity: The Curse of Modern Life*”. In it, Kuyper was the first to use the term “modernism” in its present philosophical sense contrasting it with what he stated was the truly Reformed position of “multiformity”. He critiqued both the philosophy of secular culture *and* the historical Catholic position. Secular modernism he considered the “*the daughter of the French Revolution*”²⁶ but the promised emancipation was seen to have degenerated rapidly into a totalitarianism, licentiousness and lawlessness, a false conception of liberty outside all moral restraint once mediated by the religious instinct²⁷. He was not alone in making this connection, finding Russell a peculiar ally on this point when he charged the Renaissance

²³ Kuyper’s fullest statement of his understanding of knowledge (“science”) is found in Kuyper (1905). See also Rushdoony, R. (2013 (1949)). *Van Til and the Limits of Reason* (Kindle ed.). Vallecito: Ross House, loc.138-191; 313-317 for a brief summary of the radical contrast with modernist philosophy.

²⁴ Russell, B. (1991 (1961))., pp.783-789

²⁵ Bratt (1999), pp.2, 19

²⁶ Kuyper (1898), pp.24-25

²⁷ Kuyper (1898), p.2. The political party Kuyper founded, the *Anti-Revolutionary Party* referred to the French Revolution.

with “*anarchy and disaster*”²⁸ and late-modernism of “*cosmic impiety*”²⁹. In contrast, Kuyper was militantly pluralist in the sense that he did not want to restore an ecclesiastical hegemony by replacing the Catholic State church with a Protestant one that would then mediate culture. This is sometimes asserted as the both the actual historical Reformed position of the Calvinist nations (Northern Europe) and what his thinking inspired in the alleged theocracy envisaged by Christian Reconstructionism that readily cite him as their philosophical inspiration³⁰.

However, by “multiformity” he was explicitly rejecting State control of culture. “Multiformity” was used as an antonym to modernist “uniformity”, it meant a form of political pluralism of expression, “*this was pluralism under secularisation but not secularism, positive conviction without imposed belief*”³¹. His clear purpose was to grant pluralism as a cultural reality, legitimacy in his Calvinist public square. Such was his nuancing that some within the Reformed communion considered him to have gone beyond it and rejected his formulation entirely³². Even modern Reformed commentators anxious to stay within the walls of Presbyterian orthodoxy, have been seen to skip over his philosophical pluralism

²⁸ Russell, B. (1991 (1961)), p.781

²⁹ Russell, B. (1991 (1961)), p.782. Russell’s use of this term indicates his probable agnosticism rather than atheism. Though famous as an atheist he was a lapsed puritan from his youth and his daughter describes his desire that there be sufficient evidence that he *could* believe in God.

³⁰ No author specified, “The Righteous Revolution – Could there be a theocracy in America’s future?”, <http://prosocs.tripod.com/riterev.html>, PRO-S.O.C.S, 1996. It must be said that the father of the Reconstructionist movement, R.J. Rushdoony, who cites Kuyper as seminal for the movement (Rushdoony (2013(1960)), loc. 138-191), did not view a theocracy in the terms he is alleged to by PRO-S.O.C.S. His view of theocracy was “empowered families living according to God’s Law”. Even the infamous Gary North in some of his developments of Rushdoony, may have envisioned an “ecclesiocracy” (McVicar, p.182ff) but the purpose of the ecclesiocracy was to facilitate decentralisation, not to create a Protestant hegemony. See Macneil (2016).

³¹ Bratt (1999), p.15

³² Van Til, C. (2015). *Common Grace and the Gospel*. Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, p.4. Van Til here refers to Herman Hoeksema that disagreed with Kuyper so profoundly that he founded a separate denomination. This challenge to previous orthodoxy is also the reason why Kuyper is often referred to as “neo-Calvinist”.

with minimal engagement³³. When Kuyper argued for the freedom to be considered heretical, he was arguing for the principle of intellectual freedom.

To illustrate his novelty, let us look more closely at how he shaped and applied his view of Art within culture. First it is necessary to understand the nature of his critique of the classical Roman Catholic concept of Art and we shall see later, his deconstruction of the commonly understood Calvinistic hostility to aesthetics. For the Roman Catholic Church, the dogma "*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*"³⁴ is central to its self-understanding and its relationship to culture, even today³⁵. All culture by which is meant the spheres of science, art, education, sport, politics, media family, industry and technology is mediated by the Church, authorised and authenticated by it. This dogma describes why Galileo the scientist, Descartes the philosopher³⁶, Wycliffe the theologian³⁷ and even national potentate King Henry VIII³⁸ could be respectively imprisoned, censured, exhumed for burning or excommunicated at the behest of a pope or church council. Thus, Kuyper straightforwardly observes, "*No science and no art could prosper unless shielded by ecclesiastical protection*"³⁹ for in the Catholic understanding of human culture generally, the only purpose of culture is

³³ Benedict, P. (1999). Calvinism as a Culture? In P. C. Finney, *Seeing Beyond The Word - Visual Arts and the Calvinistic Tradition* (pp. 19-45). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp.20-22

³⁴ "Outside the Church there is no salvation"

³⁵ Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. (2017, January 19). *The Popes on Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*. Retrieved from Catholicism.org: <http://catholicism.org/eens-popes.html>. The dogma was confirmed by Pope Benedict XVI who spoke of "incomplete Christians" (i.e. non-Catholics) and Pope Francis though in a more positive, revisionist sense, see Oddie, W in Bibliography.

³⁶ Marsenne, M. (1634). *Les Questions théologiques, physiques, morales et mathématiques (Questions of physics, morals and theology)*. Paris: Henry Guenon. Marsenne was a lifelong friend of Descartes who was also a publicist, important priest and scientist. He had the unenviable task of communicating to the Catholic scientists the implications of the Galileo judgement and how to avoid a similar fate.

³⁷ Fountain, D. (1984). *John Wycliffe - The Dawn of the Reformation*. Southampton: Mayflower Christian Books., p.72. Wycliffe died in 1384. The Council of Constance of Bavaria in 1415 ordered his bones dug up and burnt, a sentence eventually carried out on 9th December, 1427.

³⁸ Ridgway, C. (2017, January 19). 'Henry VIII is Excommunicated'. Retrieved from The Anne Boleyn Files: <http://www.theanneboleynfiles.com/henry-viii-is-excommunicated/>

³⁹ Kuyper (1898), p.150

in ecclesiastical service and its pinnacle of expression is the ecclesiastical matter. Culture and Religion are forever joined in symbiotic union, *“hence originated that specifically Christian art...[not] copied from nature...fettered music in the Gregorian chains, the pencil and chisel [in] acosmic creations, and which only in the building of the cathedrals [of the High Renaissance] attained the really Sublime and reaped imperishable fame”*⁴⁰. Human culture has absolutely no meaning apart from in service to the Church.

Kuyper in rejecting this view of the Church recognised that he shared the principle both in the Renaissance and the French Revolution to break free from this same Church control. However, he stated that in the former, taking its inspiration from Greece, the religious instinct meant artistic expression expressed a tendency to revert to pagan expressions or in the worship and idealisation of the human form⁴¹. In the latter, for Kuyper, God was to be deposed altogether:

Voltaire's mad cry, “Down with the scoundrel,” was aimed at Christ himself, but this cry was merely the expression of the most hidden thought from which the French Revolution sprang... the liberation of man as an emancipation from all Divine Authority. ⁴²

In contrast, Kuyper sought to positively and fundamentally redefine the relationships between the different aspects of culture and Church. The two key concepts of his formulation are “common grace” and “sphere sovereignty”. The latter is made possible by

⁴⁰ Kuyper (1898), pp.150-151

⁴¹ Kuyper (1898), p.149

⁴² Kuyper (1898), p.2

the former and both require careful examination to explicate clearly before we can apply them explicitly to art and artistic expression.

For Kuyper, the “*mandate to create culture*”⁴³ given to humanity in Gen 1:28 was an expression of the “*general cosmological principle of the sovereignty of God*”⁴⁴ and the actual life of culture was the story of how God *delegates* his authority and sovereignty to each sphere⁴⁵. Kuyper transforms the absolute monarch of Catholicism into the father of the Republic through sphere sovereignty:

here is the glorious principle of Freedom! This perfect Sovereignty of the sinless Messiah at the same time directly denies and challenges all absolute Sovereignty among sinful men on earth by dividing life into separate spheres, each with its own sovereignty⁴⁶.

For example, art, politics, religion and science are separate spheres of human life. Unlike the Catholic (and some Protestant) Kings that asserted the divine right to rule absolutely, Kuyper asserts the democratic principle and the voluntary principle, “*the sovereignty of Christ remains absolutely monarchical, but the government...on earth becomes democratic to its bones and marrow...all [are] are of equal rank, and as manifestations of one and the same body, can only be united synodically, i.e., by way of confederation*”⁴⁷. His concept of the State was similarly in radical antithesis to both the contemporary Liberal Post-Hegelian

⁴³ Bratt (2013), p.194ff

⁴⁴ Kuyper (1898), p.14

⁴⁵ Cope, L. (2015). *God and Political Justice: A Study of Civil Governance from Genesis to Revelation* (Kindle ed.). Seattle: YWAM, loc.359

⁴⁶ Kuyper, A. (1998 (1880)). ‘Sphere Sovereignty’. In J. D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper - A Centennial Reader* (pp. 461-490). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans., p.467

⁴⁷ Kuyper (1898), p.55

concept of the State and the Catholic *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*. The former ascribed absolute sovereignty to the State, “*Let the State have unlimited rule, disposing over persons their lives, their rights, their conscience, even their faith*”⁴⁸; Kuyper delineates the state purely as a ministry of justice that ensures just relations between the spheres and protects the individual conscience, “*the sovereignty of the State, as the power that protects the individual and defines the mutual relationships among the visible spheres*”. The State has a coercive function to ensure justice is served but has no jurisdiction within the principles of operation within any sphere, “*within these spheres...another authority rules, an authority that descends directly from God apart from the State.*”⁴⁹ That is, the spheres have governmental autonomy.

He then defines common grace as the unconditional action of God in the world that intervenes to prevent the collapse of civilisation and culture through the destructive effects of sin within and upon humanity. However, it also serves to remove the Church from improper jurisdiction. Whereas “particular grace” refers to God’s salvific and ethical role assigned to the Church, “common grace” refers to God’s operation in the world generally to enable the general progress of the entire human family, irrespective of race or their religious profession:

The unmitigated curse would have changed this entire earth into nothing less than a chaos of ugliness and a desert of corruption. But common

⁴⁸ Kuyper, A. (1998 (1880)), p.466

⁴⁹ Kuyper, A. (1998 (1880)), p.468. Emphasis original.

grace entered at this point. So the earth did not become those things. The curse is observable everywhere, but was restrained in its operation.⁵⁰

Common grace allows Kuyper to assert God's operation and presence within every culture, even the pagan and the non-Christian, not just within the world of the church and posit a general pluralism:

It was now understood that it was the "common grace" of God. which had produced in ancient Greece and Rome the treasures of philosophic light, and disclosed to us treasures of art and justice, which kindled the love for classical studies, in order to renew to us the profit of so splendid an heritage...a process in which every nation has its special task, and the knowledge of which may be a fountain of blessing for every people. It was apprehended that the science of politics and national economy deserved the careful attention of scholars and men of thought. Yea, it was intuitively conceived, that there was nothing either in the life of nature round about us, or in human life itself, which did not present itself as an object worthy of investigation, which might throw new light on the glories of the entire cosmos in its visible phenomena and its invisible operations.⁵¹

In this sense, he legitimises in principle the independent operation of the diverse aspects of human culture but he also prevents the improper abrogation of one sphere by another by limiting each sphere with discoverable principles of operation, "*a domain of nature in which the Sovereign exerts power over matter by fixed laws...a domain of the personal, of the*

⁵⁰ Kuyper (2011), loc. 1708

⁵¹ Kuyper (1898), p.117ff

*household, of science, of social and ecclesiastical life, each of which obeys its own laws of life, each subject to its own chief*⁵². Each has sovereign principles within it that have been put there by common grace. It establishes autonomous space for the various institutions of culture to develop and flourish according to their own principles (to which he ascribed the name “science”⁵³) which are discoverable by common grace. They are distinct and separate from the Church in all but the ethical mandate of the church, *“its absolute expression in the principle that the church has to retire to the domain of particular grace, and that exempted from her rule lies the wide and free domain of ‘common grace.’”*⁵⁴.

Thus, we can now see that Kuyper had developed a radical cultural philosophy that avoids the hegemony of Catholicism and the statism of Modernism. It is now possible to return to Art specifically and his basis for reconstructing the Reformed view of it. It should be evident that, whether it is now defined in the formalist, representational, aesthetic, institutional or historical manner or formulated as an open concept as in Neo-Wittgenstenianism, we now see that Kuyper makes autonomous space for it. As long as we can actually agree that there actually is something called “Art” whether as objects or as a practise, Kuyper asserts its legitimacy and its right to proceed free from both Church and State patronage. It gives us a fresh perspective when considering the hostility of cultural conservatives to postmodern art, readily accusing it of “destroying art”⁵⁵. However, this last accusation was made in a review of Kuyper on Art and it obviously begs the question as to

⁵² Kuyper, A. (1998 (1880))., p.467

⁵³ Kuyper, in common with many of his contemporaries and its use in antiquity, used the term “science” to refer to all the realms of human exploration and knowledge, not just those characterised by empirical methods.

⁵⁴ Kuyper (1898), p.121

⁵⁵ Colson, C. in Bratt, J. D. (2013), Endorsements.

how Kuyper himself defined Art, how he saw the artistic sphere interrelating within culture and what he believed the ultimate purpose of Art was.

Kuyper acknowledges that it was historically held as a fact that Calvin and “Art” have never been seen to be remotely friendly to one another. Kuyper readily admits the popular imagery of the Iconoclast’s purging the sanctuary of the Popish harlotry are all ascribed to Calvin’s antipathy to Art⁵⁶. Kuyper readily admits that Luther should be ascribed far greater artistic sensibility than Calvin⁵⁷. He admits the Catholics were critical of Protestants on the basis that they were not interested in the whole human aesthetic experience⁵⁸. He admits Catholicism in part defined the High Renaissance⁵⁹. He even admits that Calvinists in the early modern period became progressively embarrassed with the title of Calvinist, wanting clear water between themselves and Calvin’s austere spirituality, preferring to be called Augustinians⁶⁰. Indeed, it seemed that every cultural movement had within it the capacity to generate, inspire or extend a distinctive artistic style *except* Calvinism⁶¹.

Interestingly, Kuyper does not try to answer these charges as some modern revisionist Presbyterians have done in asserting that in fact Calvinism *did* develop an artistic style⁶² or alternatively, try to demonstrate empirically that “Art” really did matter to Protestants generally and not just Luther⁶³. Both are interesting discussions in their own

⁵⁶ Kuyper, A. (1898)., p.135; Calvin personally refused to endorse iconoclasm and argued directly against it, see Finney (1999), p.xvi.

⁵⁷ Kuyper, A. (1898)., p.135

⁵⁸ Kuyper, A. (1898)., p.130

⁵⁹ Kuyper, A. (1898)., p.137

⁶⁰ Kuyper, A. (1898)., p.5

⁶¹ Kuyper, A. (1898)., p.137

⁶² Finney, P. C. (1999). Visual Arts and the Calvinist Tradition. In P. C. Finney (Ed.), *Seeing Beyond the Word - Visual Arts and the Calvinist Tradition* (pp. xv-xviii). Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.

⁶³ Aston, N. (2009). *Art and Religion in Eighteenth Century Europe*. London: Reaktion Books, p.8

right and certainly work to correct misrepresentations of Calvin himself, who was, after all, a great literary critic but rather sidestep how the concept of Art may be formulated and its role within culture. Kuyper rather develops a philosophy of Art which rather typically of his epistemology splices the common analytic categories in describing what Art is and pulls across the functional and representational models of what artists do, leading to the assessment that *“his [pluralism] sounds postmodern, a hundred years ahead of his time”*⁶⁴. However, its underlying message for Art and the artist would seem to be a modern one, it is a message of continual progress, art will never “arrive”.

So, in the first instance, he deconstructs the concept that religious art is the highest form of Art. This is not just aimed at the Catholic use of art but also of the general religious domination and appropriation of it, *“all the...departments of art finally adapting themselves to the temple, church, mosque or pagoda...Art derived her richest motives from Religion”*⁶⁵. He then goes on to state what he considers to be the central issue, *“if this wedding of art inspired worship, with worship-inspired art be no intermediate stage, but the highest end to be obtained, then it must frankly be confessed that Calvinism cannot but plead guilty [of artlessness].”*⁶⁶ However, he then proceeds to state in the negative sense why art and religion must be separated. For religion to remain in what he considers are the symbolic and aesthetic realms of art is destructive to true religion, *“The more...Religion develops into spiritual maturity, the more it will extricate itself from [art] because art always remains incapable of expressing the very essence of Religion”*. However, he does not stop there but

⁶⁴ J.D. Bratt in *Abraham Kuyper - A Centennial Reader*. (J. D. Bratt, Ed.) Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans, p.441

⁶⁵ Kuyper, A. (1898)., p.137

⁶⁶ Kuyper, A. (1898)., p.138

also insists that art must be separated from religion for the sake of true art, *“Art also is no side-shoot on a principal branch [of religion], but an independent branch that grows from the trunk of our life itself”*. He then makes a fundamental epistemological statement that the naturalistic analytic philosophy of art could never formulate. Though Religion and Art must be separated, art has a spiritual character and function given to it by sovereign action that governs its own sphere, *“no unity in the revelation of art is conceivable, except by the art-inspiration of an Eternal Beautiful, which flows from the fountain of the Infinite.”*⁶⁷

Admittedly, this is a complex and poetic statement. It might be seen that Kuyper is denying autonomy for art by assigning a boundary of sorts. However, elsewhere he explicitly rejects art as mimesis but does conceive of art as needing to *“satisfy the law of beauty in nature”* and this serves for careful clarification. Art was illegitimate if it deliberately *“ended up celebrating the unnatural and the monstrous...portraying nakedness not in its lofty dimension but in its sensual form, succumbing to impurity”*⁶⁸. What Kuyper had in mind here is not the censoring of art or perhaps the conservative fashion for the denigration of abstract art as “unnatural”, but more the contemporary discussion of whether pornography should or could be treated as art. When one considers the pornography industry as a whole, the websites filled with malicious script designed to steal personal information, coercive abuse of drugs, sex-slavery and exploitation, the answer would seem to be a self-evident in the negative. This is the analogous function of Kuyper’s principle of “Eternal Beautiful”, that nature in its purest and perfect relation will always conform to and what art should aspire to. He lays the challenge before art to transcend

⁶⁷ Kuyper, A. (1898)., pp.138-142

⁶⁸ Kuyper, A. (2011 (1905)). *Wisdom & Wonder: Common Grace in Science & Art* (Kindle ed.). Grand Rapids: Christian's Library Press., loc.1874-1880

naturalist conceptions, it is an epistemological principle informed by his spirituality.

Naturalist epistemology might admit pornography as Art, but this is because it has evicted the concept of human worth from the equation in the name of objectivity⁶⁹. Kuyper sees art as having the context of the human at its most noble and of celebrating creation, what violates the human and nature in its most elevated spiritual sense, denigrates art:

art is the expression of that wonderful capacity within man whereby he can do what otherwise only God can do, that is, create...do not complain that we have returned to the imitation theory of art. The imitation theory of art never talks about imitating God, but about imitating nature.⁷⁰

Now another corollary is also necessary I believe to complete his picture of Art.

Kuyper considered art in the non-utilitarian sense, "*art labours for the sake of beauty and not for the sake of the uses in the service of which we might put beauty*"⁷¹. This too emphasises the individual liberty necessary for the artist and the spirituality he believed was communicated by true art. Patronage or commissioning of the artist, especially for religious or political purposes, he would also consider the lower form of the art⁷². The latter especially are pertinent in our current age of subsidised art and present a real challenge to the artist to be true to their vocation to take one beyond the mundane and rational into the realms of the higher soul and spirit. Though one might argue the influence of aesthetic theories of art in this statement, this speaks of a much more profound human experience

⁶⁹ Kuyper's epistemological arguments are presented in Part 1 of Kuyper (2011). It is striking how often he refers to the "human" context of knowledge speaking of the "antithesis" of the naturalistic, analytic view of knowledge.

⁷⁰ Kuyper, A. (2011 (1905)), loc. 1934, 1953

⁷¹ Kuyper, A. (2011 (1905)), loc. 1914

⁷² Kuyper, A. (1898), p.156

which is why the adjective “postmodern” so readily attaches itself to Kuyper. However, “postmodern” is in itself a naturalistic misnomer, he was asserting a *Christian* position but one far beyond what Calvinism had previously permitted and is only, after a century of tired fundamentalism, once more being considered for what it is.

So, in summary, we understand that Kuyper’s cultural philosophy developed as a concentrated and considered response to the Darwinism, totalitarianism and the analytic turn of late-modernism with which the 20th century opened. His key concepts were those of common grace and sphere sovereignty to allow for political plurality and establish autonomous spheres whose internal principles or “science” are expressions of God’s sovereign will for each of them. He thus embraces modernity but rejects modernism. Kuyper was concerned centrally with cultural *liberty* but this was not the liberty of the autonomous man or woman of the Enlightenment, or the impiety of the Renaissance. His autonomy does not mean that the cultural institutions have no interrelationships or are “value free”; all culture is to be bounded by the “Eternal Beautiful” expressing the sovereign operation of the Church to ethically address but not coerce culture. Kuyper pictures life as the interoperability of these sovereign spheres with each sphere central to God’s purpose, “the history of mankind is not so much an aphoristic spectacle of cruel passions as a *coherent process* with the Cross as its centre”⁷³. Art as a sphere of life has autonomous purpose and meaning and its purpose is to rise to the highest and purest forms of human expression possible for humanity. Without a robust epistemology rooted in their awareness as spiritual beings with a purposeful existence of which art has the special privilege of

⁷³ Kuyper (2011), loc. 1686. Emphasis added.

unfolding, men would be overcome by tyranny one to another and has within them a principle of moral depravity that causes one to turn on another. So, although Kuyper argued for pluralism and sphere sovereignty, it was only when individuals and cultures became *wise* by understanding their existence had meaning because of the image of God they carried, that they would correctly contextualise themselves. Only then could they avoid later catastrophic collapse of their cultures.

Thus, in concluding, remember I began the essay was with a view to exploring why Kuyper is again speaking so clearly to us and I believe it is because he so clearly articulates a message for Western culture at its present juncture, a place of focused and inimical polarisation. The message is one of the necessity for an informed pluralism, cultural “multiformity” rather than state imposed uniformity in the name of social justice and equality. It is a pluralism that admits all but will take a stand for a moral position asserting there is such a thing as moral knowledge⁷⁴, rather than a relativism that refuses to condemn the concentration camp guard⁷⁵ and will dare to challenge my view of my sexuality or challenge my “deeply held beliefs” without accusation of “hate speech”. It says I may disagree with you but that does not mean I hate you. It is not acceptable in the public square to equate my verbiage with “violence” and thus physical violence becomes an acceptable response to your perceived hatred of me with your mouth. The healthy society

⁷⁴ See for example, Willard, Dallas. *The Divine Conspiracy Continued: Fulfilling God’s Kingdom on Earth*. p. 87ff.; Willard, Dallas. *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge*. pp. 65-94. Dallas Willard was a distinguished professor of philosophy at the secular University of Southern California until 2012 (d. 2013) described by the current head of the department as “one of the most popular, versatile and dedicated teachers the School of Philosophy has ever known.” The particular emphasis of his work was the possibility of moral knowledge. A website dedicated to his work is <http://www.dwillard.org/>

⁷⁵ Rorty, R. (2006). *Take care of freedom and truth will take care of itself*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p25

is a diverse and authentically pluralistic one, not the politically correct one that like a modern-day Catholic Inquisition will fire me and jail me for daring to be a heretic. Yet, it is above all, a society with a moral conscience, and I leave the final word to Wittgenstein who was also to reflect 12 years after the death of Kuyper at the height of positivism he inspired but quickly repudiated, “[this] madness [springs] from irreligiousness”⁷⁶.

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⁷⁶ Wittgenstein, L. (2006). *Culture and Value* (Revised 2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell, p.15e

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