



Theology in the Public Square

Kuyper's Contributions Highlighted in New PTS Center



Abraham Kuyper, 1837–1920

by Max L. Stackhouse

In 1898, the most influential theologian of The Netherlands, who was also the founder of the Free University in Amsterdam, publisher of a newspaper for Protestant readers, head of one of the first mass political parties in Europe, and soon to become the prime minister of Holland, delivered the Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary.

In his “Lectures on Calvinism,” Abraham Kuyper argued that the Reformed tradition is essentially a life-system that pertains to every sphere of life—to the interpretation of history, politics, science, art, and the various other sectors of society. The tradition from Calvin, he claimed, is not only for life under the steeple, and it is diminished when it is treated this way. Nor is it only a private piety, as the “cultured despisers of religion” allege, or a political theology established as a state religion or required for citizenship or developed to guide regimes. It is rather a

worldview, one arguable in public discourse and pertinent to the whole of the common life, that the creator God, known by common grace, by the special grace in Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, created, providentially cares for, and is redeeming humanity and the world.

In 1998, PTS celebrated the centennial of these lectures. At the prompting of Rimmer de Vries, a Dutch immigrant and avid disciple of Kuyper who became a successful business leader in the United States, and in cooperation with Calvin College in Michigan, the Free University of Amsterdam, the Center for Public Justice in Washington, D.C., and the Religion Division of The Pew Charitable Trusts of Philadelphia, Princeton

Seminary hosted the largest conference ever held on campus. Scholars gave tributes, expositions, refinements, and critiques of Kuyper’s contributions and arguments, and their papers were edited into a notable volume by Luis Lugo. A compelling new collection of other writings, such as *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, edited by James Bratt, was also introduced.

That conference signaled the Seminary’s intention to establish the Kuyper Center and to gather the Kuyper Collection of research materials for the library as a parallel and complement to PTS’s Karl Barth Center and Collection. The Kuyper Center joins other research and advocacy centers on Kuyper’s work already existing in Canada, England,

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and South Korea, as well as in Holland, and a wider network of centers for public theology around the world. The conference was also the occasion for the first annual Kuyper Prize for Excellence in Reformed Theology and Public Life, endowed by de Vries, who, with his wife, Ruth, also established an endowed faculty chair and a fund for graduate student research grants. The Kuyper Prize is given annually to a leader in any field who exemplifies a public connection between the Reformed faith and work in a sphere of society in which he or she carries out his or her own, often nonclerical, vocation.

The Idea of Public Theology

Public theology is not a term used by Kuyper or his closest disciples in the Dutch tradition. Rather, it is an idea developed after World War II to apply to a longer tradition, rooted in the Bible and developed over the centuries by Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and the Puritan Fathers, and more recently exemplified by the Catholic Social Encyclicals. In the United States, it was developed by Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel, Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s struggles for human rights and social justice. None of these thinkers held political office, but all shaped theologically grounded social movements that transformed the common ethos of their times—and, indeed, of subsequent history.

The term fits Kuyper, who, like all of these, saw it as a false choice to attempt to withdraw from public life, as if faith could be made pure by isolation, or to attempt to control society by state power, as if faithfulness and righteousness could be induced by coercive means. Such strategies have been tried by monks and popes, pietists and theocrats in many traditions. They have, in every case, failed, and discredited the faith

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they sought to secure. Instead, the social and ethical implications of theology have to be carried into every sphere of society by the actions and witness of convicted laity who are called to fulfill their ministries in the common life.

The renewed interest in Kuyperian thought as a contributor to public theology comes as the neo-evangelical and the Pentecostal traditions all over the world are experiencing tremendous growth and the older Reformation traditions are declining in numbers, integrity, and influence. Yet it seems these newer traditions today have minimal resources for relating their faith to the changing social realities, as globalization creates the varied possibilities of a worldwide



Photo: Becky White Newgren

Max Stackhouse

civil society. Kuyper held that a re-reformed and ever-reforming Calvinism, working cooperatively with a revised Catholicism, could generate a faith-based social philosophy able to guide civilizations in an emerging era.

Kuyper wanted each community of faith to have a place in the complex of society, and to join the debate—at which he was no amateur—for the loyalty and informed commitment of the people. This debate was necessary, he thought, because a pluralistic, democratic society with freedom for all demanded theological underpinnings, and the Calvinist tradition, he believed, best supplied the vertebrate resources for such a society. Nothing else could refine the spiritual and moral ethos that a principled pluralism required, although it had to win its way by the power of the word, by persuasion, not by resistance or imposition. Further, even if believers have the right idea, they are not exempt from sin, pride, and selfishness. And even if pagans, agnostics, atheists, or panthe-

ists were spiritually mistaken, they might in fact know things that are true, right, and good. Thus, since God had allowed this pluralism in life to continue, it is doubtful that humans can draw demarcations too sharply or exclusively. This is true even if the fate of society is at stake, and even if one preaches and teaches with vigor against views Christians think are false.

What made a serious debate possible and not simply a series of postures shouting at each other is “common grace.” God has not only created all humans in the divine image, God works in the hearts of all, constraining evil and fostering impulses to the good, and allowing all to have a sense of what is right and true—or at least to be suspicious of what seems wrong and false. This grace does not bring salvation, but it invites the recognition of validity and excellence from many sources, and the relative capacity of all, including the “little people” and unbelievers, to contribute to the general welfare. God’s providence continues to unfold the first principles and ultimate purposes of it all. If one goes into politics, as did Kuyper, the primary purpose is to seek that polity and those policies that would allow the various spheres of society and all people to do their best without undue interference of statist or ecclesiastical control, and to enable each perspective to try to make its case in public debate. This is part of what it means to live by faith.

The Kuyper Lectures

The noted biographer of Kuyper and the founding director of the Historical Documentation Center for Dutch Protestantism, George Puchinger, was the first Kuyper Lecturer. In spite of ill health, but with the aid of George Harinck, the current director of that center, he offered a condensed version of his “Kuyper’s Early Journey of Faith” and indicated that he would work with PTS to see that his vast personal library on Kuyper and related topics would come to Speer Library. Those materi-

als were incorporated into the PTS collection with the help of a Luce Foundation grant.

Subsequent Kuyper lecturers and prize recipients also exemplify something of the reach of public theological concerns in their wider implications. In 1999, John Witte Jr., director of the Law and Religion Program at Emory University and prolific author on the relation of the Reformation traditions to human rights and to family law, spoke on “God’s Joust, God’s Justice: The Revelations of Legal History.” He was followed the next year by Eka Darmaputera, pastor, professor at the Jakarta Theological College, past president of the Reformed Church of Indonesia, and founder of several newspapers advocating democracy in the face of tyrannical rule, and dialogue with moderate Muslims to that end. He spoke on “The Search for a New Place and Role of Religion in the Democratic Order of the Post-Soeharto Indonesia.”

In 2001, James Skillen, a political philosopher and president of the Center for Public Justice, spoke on “*E Pluribus Unum* and Faith-Based Welfare Reform” as the debate over faith-based social service programs reached its apex. He was followed by Andrew Young, former congressman and Ambassador to the United Nations, who addressed “New Strategies for Economic Development in Africa,” with an emphasis on the responsibilities and opportunities for investment by U.S.-based corporations.

In 2004, the recently elected prime minister of The Netherlands, Jan Peter Balkenende, who holds three degrees from the Free University, spoke at PTS (and at Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School) on “Solid Values for a Better Future,” emphasizing the role of ethics in the emerging, largely secular, new development of the European Union and its relationship to the United States. As head of his party,

the heir of Kuyper’s Anti-Revolutionary Party, which opposed the ideology of the French Revolution that forced the secularization of society and led to Napoleon’s imperial rule, Balkenende accented the conversation between faith and politics that guides his life. “All spheres of life derive their authority from God,” he said, “...and the state should not be too dominant, although it must enable the institutions of society to do the things [they do] better than government.”

And last year, Charles Villavicencio, executive director of South Africa’s Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and editor of several volumes of the famed Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, the land-

The issue of Kuyperian thought in South Africa, which has been treated by several noted authors such as David J. Bosch and John de Gruchy, still troubles many. A new study has been commissioned to sort out the disputed issues and the highly mixed impressions some have.

The Kuyper Prize for 2006 was awarded to Robert Seiple, former director of WorldVision, Ambassador for Human Rights under President Clinton, and subsequently founder and chairman of the Institute for Global Engagement in Washington, D.C. He delivered the Kuyper Lecture on April 17 on “The Gospel Blimp Revisited: Reflections on Christian Witness and Persecution,” a topic often treated in the journal his institute publishes, *Faith and International Affairs*. An international panel responded in a forum the next morning.

All the Kuyper lecturers have multidisciplinary careers and involvements, and are active in law, in politics, or in nonprofit organizations. Kuyperian theology and the Kuyper Center emphasize the connections between personal faith and vocational activities, the church and civil society, and faith and public life, much as Calvin aimed to do in the Geneva of the Reformation.



Photo: C. Nolan Huiizenga



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Immediately above: Clifford Anderson, curator of the PTS Kuyper Collection
Top: bust of Abraham Kuyper from the collection

mark ten-year project that sought to resolve some of the tensions, memories, hates, and distortions of the apartheid years, took up the vexing issue of the relationship between certain distorted views of Kuyperian thought and the development of Afrikaner racist and tyrannical policies. He also suggested ways in which a more accurate reading of the Kuyperian heritage could aid the reconstruction of that still-troubled but now more equitable society.

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The Kuyper Center

I have been pleased to be the first director of the Kuyper Center. The center now has a board of directors that includes Princeton Seminary professors Peter Paris and Wentzel van Huyssteen, and is led by our librarian, Stephen Crocco, with curator Clifford Anderson as the primary coordinator of its projects. The board of directors is responsible for the nomination of the Kuyper lecturers and prize recipients and for the selection of recipients of the grants for doctoral research. The collections material is becoming available for advanced research as fast as it can be catalogued.

The center has also sponsored three notable consultations. One, titled “Common Grace, Theology, Ecology, and Technology,” in 2002, treated competing theories of cre-

ation and nature in theology, and the implications for technology's capacity to disrupt or to creatively transform, repair, or improve the biophysical ecology of the earth. Brad Allenby, known for his pioneering article, "Earth Systems Engineering: The World as Human Artifact," was the keynote speaker. Other speakers were Robert Solocow, Princeton University professor of engineering, who specializes in environmental effects; Henry Jacoby, MIT specialist in environmental economics; Vincent Bacote, a Wheaton College professor, who recently wrote on Kuyper's public theology and environmental stewardship; Calvin DeWitt, professor at the Institute for Environmental Studies (University of Wisconsin); Thomas

which the discipline of economics is rooted in theological assumptions about the duty to save people from material want and poverty. Other contributors were Robert Wuthnow of Princeton University and author of *Poor Richard's Principle*; John Schneider of Calvin College and author of *The Good of Affluence*; Elwin Beukes of Kings University College, Canada, and past regional director for the World Bank; Andrew Hoffman of Boston University, who writes on ethics and management; and myself. The papers from both these consultations are available on the Kuyper Center web site (<http://library.ptsem.edu/collections/kuyper>); some are published in the *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, as are most of the annual

by Dutch theologians. Christo Lombard, of Namibia, presented a paper on the development of the Belhar Confession of 1982 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church declaring the doctrine of apartheid heretical. Allen Janssen gave a paper on the reception of the Belhar Confession in the Reformed Church of America. And Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, originally a Canadian and now teaching at Eastern University in Pennsylvania, offered a paper on how public theology in the Kuyperian tradition can face the problem of being faithful in the midst of wartime and conflict.

All in all, this effort to enrich the Reformed tradition is off to an energetic start, a fact confirmed by the response



Photo: Loren Pankratz



Photo: Becky White Newgren



Photo: Erin Dunitigan



Photo: James Hong

Clockwise, from top: Jan Peter Balkenende (left) and former PTS president Tom Gillespie; Max Stackhouse (left) and Andrew Young; John Witte (left) and Rimmer de Vries; and (left to right) Max Stackhouse, Charles Villa-Vicencio, and President Iain Torrance

Derr, the former coordinator of the World Council of Churches' Project on Faith, Science, and the Future; and our own Clifford Anderson, who was completing a study on Barth's view of science.

A second consultation, held in 2003, focused on "Theology and Economic Life: Exploring Hidden Links." The keynote speaker was University of Maryland economist Robert Nelson, author of *Reaching for Heaven on Earth* and *The Religion of Economics*, both of which trace the ways in

Kuyper Lectures. The lectures are also available on audiotape for listening on site or for purchase on CD from the Seminary's Media Department, which can be reached at 609.497.7900.

The center also led a session focused on "Dutch Protestant Traditions: From Barmen to Belhar" at the American Academy of Religion in 2005. George Harinck gave a paper on the reception of the Barmen Declaration, made by the confessing churches of Germany as Hitler was on the rise,

of the students enrolled in my course this semester, "Theology and Ethics of Abraham Kuyper," the first course ever given at Princeton on Kuyper's thought. ■

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