"ABRAHAM KUYPER'S 150th BIRTHDAY ANNIVERSARY"

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FOR: James D. Bratt
"Abraham Kuyper's 150th Birthday"
AADAS Conference, Palos Heights IL
Sept. 24, 1987

STATEMENT

Abraham Kuyper worked out one of the most comprehensive and critical responses to modernity in the recent Reformed tradition. Some of the highlights and difficulties of his vision are evident from his speeches and reflections on his American tour of 1898. The paper will examine these along with his enduring impact on and example for the Dutch-American community today.

OUTLINE

1. The question of Kuyper's life: Christianity and modernity

2. Key phases and ideas of Kuyper's work:

   a. Church reform, 1865-1886: "antithesis"

   b. Education, 1875-1890s: "sphere sovereignty"

   c. Politics, 1890-1905: "common grace"

   d. Cultural critique/engagement, 1905-1920: "kingship of Christ"

3. Kuyper and the U. S.

   a. The lure of "Christian America"

   b. Advice to Dutch Americans

   c. Advice to WASP elite

   d. Problems in Kuyper's vision

4. Kuyper's impact on and role for Dutch Americans today

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October 29, 1987 will mark the 150th anniversary of Abraham Kuyper's birth. In his lifetime (he died in 1920), Kuyper was a towering figure in the Netherlands' public life: a reknowned theologian, editor, pundit, political activist, and statesman. But why should we remember him so many years later on a distant continent? Put a little differently, how should we remember him? How should our picture differ from the ones we have seen of him before?

Briefly, "Kuyper" has meant one of three things to Dutch-Americans. For some, he has been the first if not the last word on how Christians should act in the world. That is, they should act separately, distinctively, and militantly, with suspicion of non-Christians' motives, with confidence that God would uphold them in the battle and give them the final victory, and with fixed attention on building up the pure Christian worldview and institutional apparatus required for the fray. Others have been so offended by the arrogance, the divisiveness, the false urgency they see in this position that they have tried to forget Kuyper altogether and follow supposedly more "American" or genial strategies. Somewhere in between, a third line has tried to claim Kuyper's general spirit while disclaiming various of his specific practices, to adapt his principles and insights to perceivedly different conditions than he himself faced.

None of these attitudes is without ironies, as we shall see. Nor could any escape Kuyper's power, even in rejection. For Kuyper hit upon the key problem of his age and ours--the relationship between religion and the modern socio-cultural order. How he meant to solve this problem and what complicated his intentions are the subject of this paper. To find out the

first we need to sketch what he did in the Netherlands. To see the second we need only watch his performance in America.

Kuyper came to maturity in the late 1850s and early 1860s, thus on the verge of the Netherlands' decisive turn toward modernization. The fallout from the 1848 revolutions across its borders raised the political question of liberalism, constitutionalism, and popular democracy. The country's long postponed industrialization was finally underway by 1870, auguring fundamental changes in all socio-economic arrangements. Between these two, communications networks and formal educational requirements were broadened, ensuring that the cultural challenge of modernity, the potential disruption of loyalties and values, thought- and belief-systems, would be felt directly on the popular level. It was Kuyper's historic opportunity to witness the rise and (by virtue of his longevity) the maturation of this process firsthand. It was his great achievement that he understood what was going on, often with great acuity, and that he tried to articulate a complete and consistent Reformed response to it. It is for this, essentially, that he is remembered.

Modernization of course has many parts, and so did Kuyper. His biographers all list early on the great number and variety of offices he held, roles he played, and ventures he attempted. But not all his parts were equal. The first one he played in public life, that of ordained minister, was less than crucial, lasting little more than ten years. It was rather as newspaper editor, a post he picked up late in his pastorates, that Kuyper found his true calling. Journalism proved to be his fundamental and longest lasting role, the means by which he created a constituency and directed it. With instrument and audience in hand, he drove them to the

causes of church reform, Christian education, and political action. Note two key strains in Kuyper's outlook here. He was a populist in realizing that the issues of modern times would involve rank-and-file opinion more than ever before. Thus he helped create the Netherlands' first mass-circulation newspaper and mass-based political party. He was also an idealist, in that he believed the intellectual-spiritual dimension of life held sway over the future. Thus he saw himself fighting "for the soul of the nation," and pressed his campaigns at the enculturating institutions of society: church, school, and press.

The enemy in all this was therefore not modernization, the social process, but "Modernism" the ideology: the complex of thought that was naturalistic in assumptions, secularistic in horizon, humanistic in confidence, and scientific in approach; in short, that saw man as maker, arbiter, and savior of his own world. Against that outlook Kuyper erected his "Calvinism": the belief in the sovereignty of God, and loyal obedience to his will and Word. Where Europe had once been rejuvenated in the Protestant (=Calvinistic!) Reformation, Kuyper argued, it had lately fallen into the Modernist Revolution. The two were destined to battle for world control. The outcome was ultimately the Lord's, Kuyper the theologian knew; but the future near and not-so-near, Kuyper the daily columnist feared, would be grim.

Against and only against that world-historical backdrop Kuyper worked his tiny Dutch corner. Grandiose visions and catch-penny dealings were no contraries to this man. His efforts first went into a long, twenty-year (1866-86) campaign to bring the National Reformed Church back to confessional orthodoxy and proper (free, decentralized) polity. A

revitalized church was to rejuvenate the nation. But this struggle involved Kuyper in ever mounting bitterness and recrimination. Out of it he honed one of his cardinal theological points--the antithesis. The redeemed and the unregenerate moved out of contrary convictions and commitments; hence they had always and only to combat each other; hence compromise, mixed solutions, and mediating proposals were illusory, whether in church or culture. But just such solutions attracted most in the National Church, so that Kuyper's last measure of reform, the Doleantie of 1886, proved to be only the departure of some of the orthodox into a new fellowship.

His education campaign went better. Beginning in the mid-1870s, the Christian school movement built steadily and firmly, achieving legal parity with the state system by World War I. In higher education, the Free University was established by 1880 and also grew in size and respect. The antithesis applied here again, but another of Kuyper's seminal doctrines entered in as well, namely "sphere sovereignty." This meant first of all that each ideological circle--Calvinist, Catholic, humanist, etc.--should be free to nurture their children by their own lights without encroachment by others. And it meant secondly that the school, the church, the state (and by extension the firm, the union, the arts, the press) should take care of its own business and not unduly impinge on the others. Kuyper yearned for the full, flush development of society and culture, a return of the 17th-century Dutch "golden age," and he saw his spheres arrangement as most conducive to it.

Both the church and the school battles got Kuyper involved in politics, and from 1890 on he settled most of his attention there. If the institutional church could not be purified to reform the nation, perhaps the

"organic church," the body of believers in daily life, might. To this end Kuyper struck a historic agreement between Calvinists and Catholics that would bring this religious coalition to the head of the Dutch government as often as not in the 20th century. Kuyper got his own chance as prime minister early in the century (1901-05), but his term did not go well. His party turned to younger candidates thereafter, so Kuyper spent his last fifteen years gravitating a bit resentfully toward the sidelines. He turned toward cultural commentary of a rather doleful stripe on the character and prospects of the West. As World War I bore out some of his predictions, his powers declined, his roles and offices dropped off one by one, until he died, "a helpless babe in Christ" as he said, in 1920 at age 83.

His last three decades crystallized a few other themes which any portrait of his thought must include. First, politics, especially a politics that is successful and wins public responsibility, cannot go forward simply under the antithesis. So Kuyper refurbished the Reformed idea of common grace, which recognized residual talent and virtue among the unsaved and allowed believers some basis for working with them on a broad scale. That doctrine encouraged, secondly, a rich Christian engagement with culture. Kuyper had long lamented the pious fear not of Modernism but of modernization as such, the pattern of resigning the world to the devil, preserving the faith in a small corner of safe doctrine or ardent feeling (although usually allowing, to be sure, some action, preferably profitable economic action, in the world much on the world's terms). His cry to the contrary, that Christians enter every area of life to bear witness to God's will there, that they fear nothing as too inimical, scorn nothing as too earthly for Christian redemption--this cry echoes loud down the corridors of

Dutch-American history and probably constitutes Kuyper's clearest legacy here.

But it was exactly the lines of politics and culture that tripped Kuyper up on his American trip of 1898. His remarks about the United States in particular reveal some of the fault-lines of his thought in general. I am referring here not primarily to the attempt by some of his followers to duplicate on this side of the ocean the full Netherlandic system of separate Christian institutions, especially a political party and labor union. That attempt was doomed by its failure to gain support from other sectors of the ethnic community. The guardians of piety and orthodoxy in the CRC ridiculed the plan as vain and dangerously worldly. The more optimistic leaders in the RCA found the opposite fault: America was already so Christian that such separate organizations were unnecessary, even insulting.

Kuyper's problem lay in sharing too much of the latter attitude and the assumptions behind it. How could so tough-minded a critic, one with such austere standards for what constituted true Christianity, one so deft at ferreting out worldly principles beneath an innocuous surface, make this mistake? Easily, given his two cardinal notions about the land: a) America was founded on a Christian, even a Calvinistic basis; b) America was the preeminent land of modernization--of technical and industrial progress, of full, free development in society and culture. These added up to an irresistible c): Christianity <u>was</u> compatible with advancing, modern culture, just as Kuyper had been arguing for years to pietists and secularists alike. And proof positive was the United States which in the very summer of his visit (1898) had jumped so dramatically into the circle of the world's colonial powers, as it had a few years before taken over global economic

leadership from Great Britain. Thus Kuyper's American trip brought him, besides an honorary doctorate from Princeton for which he was abjectly grateful, bold confirmation of his dearest hope. It even bore out some subthemes of his work. For what explained America's rapid development, Kuyper asked, but the working of something very much like sphere sovereignty: a free people with a free church in a free (and fairly minimal) state? And what did all this development, particularly its technological and economic side, mean but that America was of all the world the land of common grace?

No wonder Kuyper was in a good mood as he toured the Dutch-American settlements in the fall of 1898. The hearty reception he met there did not hurt either. To this audience Kuyper prescribed a course of full, confident Americanization. The land was fair, in both senses of the word. It was agreeable to Dutch taste, rewarding to Dutch diligence; it threatened neither sound principle nor virtuous practice. Moreover its vices were such--churches full but preaching a bit shallow; the public tone too raucous; political discourse free but strident--that good folk could make a salutary difference. For now, the Dutch should get ready to enter public life more forcefully, Kuyper told them. They needed to outgrow their understandable but still narrow materialism. They should try to heal their denominational rift. (Kuyper refused to get specific on the lodge membership or Christian school issues that defined that rift, however.) Above all, they should keep voting Republican, the party founded by the good Christian Hamilton in opposition to that impious Revolutionary Jefferson.

Off the Dutch-American trail, however, Kuyper sounded different. Here he had another audience, consisting of the native WASP elite in university

and seminary circles from Princeton to Chicago (McCormick Seminary) to Rochester (a women's literary guild), to Baltimore (Johns Hopkins). To them he spoke of the rising challenge of Modernism, the antithesis dawning even in the land of common grace, and the urgency of restoring the nation's ancestral Calvinism as a political as well as a theological force. His audience listened politely and went home bemused. Outside of a few people at Princeton, they did not understand.

Kuyper had been warned of that reaction years before. During the church battle of the 1880s he had inquired about emigrating to the U. S. His correspondent, Nicholas M. Steffens, professor at the RCA's Western Seminary, told him to forget it. The vaunted religious nature of the American people, he warned, amounted to personal piety among the laity and administrative busywork among the clergy. There was no place for the theological depth, the philosophical consistency, the socio-political implications that were Kuyper's meat and drink. If America was materially a generation ahead of the Netherlands, as Kuyper had written, it was intellectually a generation behind, which meant that the tendencies Kuyper was fighting there were already sprouting here, only with few tools sharpened to cut them.

Proof of Steffens's complaint lay in another source of the Americans' bemusement. They already <u>were</u> involved in Christian politics, they might have answered Kuyper. The Progressive movement of the time had precisely a (native) Protestant clientele and a platform embodying the Protestant virtues of decency, order, efficiency, and public accountability. That the movement also had a secular philosophy of state and society bothered Kuyper's Dutch-American followers much but his American audience not at all.

But then Kuyper had made a similar mistake in coming to his notion of an originally Christian America in the first place. His confusion of the Pilgrim Fathers and the Founding Fathers, of Massachusetts Bay in the 1630s and Philadelphia in the 1770-80s, is familiar enough to anyone who has watched Christian Right TV the last ten years. It was only a bit more understandable then than now, for Kuyper was following the lead of George Bancroft, the most influential American historian of the nineteenth century.

One of Kuyper's problems, then, lay in the looseness of his intellectual method. "Calvinism" in one case would demand hewing to a fine doctrinal line, in another case could encompass a broad historical sweep and most general ethic. That arbitrariness, the use of a noble name to clinch a dubious or partisan argument, would haunt Kuyperians of all stripes in years to come and would be one incentive for dropping the tradition altogether. The idealist part of his method added to the problem. Kuyper thought that the right ideas could be held independent of, and in control over, a social process; that we could have modernization without Modernism. But there was a deep (though not inevitable) connection between the two that belies this assumption. A social process carries its own logic and imperatives which prescribe limits for the generation and acceptance of ideas. American modernization created the pragmatic and personalistic atmosphere that allowed intense religion in the private sphere but left public domains to an operative secularism. Impressed by the former, Kuyper missed too much of the latter, hence underestimated the severity of the American disease and miscalculated its cure.

His Dutch-American audience, longer immersed in this atmosphere, saw better and so entered public life along different tracks from the one Kuyper

imagined. Those in the RCA began to leave their Christian America positio under the secularist shock of the 1920s, but they searched for a more nati trajectory. Plenty of people in both denominations pursued the pietist-materialist combination we sketched above. The critical-pluralist heritag of Kuyper lived on chiefly in CRC academic circles. They have maintained over the 20th century a critique of American secular culture more penetrating than Kuyper's and have tried to build an alternative Christian vision that has something of his range, depth, and enthusiasm. These constitute both Kuyper's best fruit and a valuable service to contemporary American Christianity. But note their theoretical, intellectual nature. Institutionally, as Herbert Brinks has said, Dutch America has built nothi that would not have been built anyway, Kuyper or not. His influence, in sum, amounts to having instilled a new spirit or purpose into existing or foreordained structures.

How should we view Kuyper, then? Certainly not as an infallible authority. He who adapted his ancestral Calvinism to the needs of his age would expect no less of us. And the issues of our day are different than his. Coarse secularization and blatant class struggle have been transmute into matters of racism and the Third World, consumerism and cool technical-therapeutic management. The latter especially is tailor-made for a pragmatic-personalistic approach that is more supple than Kuyper's systematics, yet--as his own case showed--may be more seductive and corrosive of Christianity than an outright threat. Christianity's encount with a <u>post</u>modern culture must go beyond a moment-by-moment, seat-of-the-pants doing of what seems nice or moral or full of evangelical good will. It must, to adopt Kuyper's favorite tree metaphor, draw off deep roots, se

out broad and high yet finely articulated branches, display long endurance, coherence, comprehensiveness, and integrity. It must stand against the wind, yet provide beauty and shelter for inhabitants and observers. For nurturing such a plant we have in Kuyper a daunting example.