

*Kuyper*  
LECTURE



# The Kuyper Lecture

by  
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ABRAHAM KUYPER  
(1837-1920)

By means of the Kuyper Lecture, the Center for Public Justice seeks to promote public consideration of three important dynamics at work in today's world:

- The deep, driving influence of competing religions in human society;
- The comprehensive and inescapable claim of Jesus Christ on the world;
- The strength and influence of international bonds of Christian community.

Inaugurated by the Center in 1995, the annual lecture is named for Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), an influential Dutch scholar-statesman whose many contributions to public life were defined by a creative Christian response to these dynamics. Kuyper believed that the Christian life cannot be confined to church life. Accepting Christ's claim of authority over the entire world, he sought to follow the implications of that faith into politics, journalism, the university, and other human endeavors.

## Why a Kuyper Lecture?

There is a new energy at work today in the relation of religion to politics. For years, Americans assumed that their special practice of separating church and state answered all the important questions: government is a public, “secular” business, and religion is a private, “sacred” affair. But at the start of the twenty-first century, this simple formula is no longer self-evident and seldom goes unchallenged. The vitality of religion, both for good and for ill, is at work in all facets of public life, and not only here in the United States.

The annual Kuyper Lecture focuses attention on the deepest and broadest questions about religion and public life from a Christian point of view. To be sure, citizens and their representatives in government and the courts must struggle day by day over particular legislative and legal details; such is the art and obligation of statecraft. But if the details are the only things that ever occupy our civic attention, then many of the most important, far-reaching and long-term questions about the deeper meaning of law and government will never be asked or debated in public.

The truth is that political and legal affairs cannot be confined to government offices. Government and the law typically have to do with the health and well-being of a public order in which families, businesses, churches, schools, the arts and sciences, and many other institutions and activities exist and interact with one another. How then ought we to understand all of these together? In particular, how do we comprehend the public order from a Christian point of view?

The Kuyper Lecture does not, for the most part, focus on Kuyper himself, but rather affords an opportunity for leaders in different fields to address the BIG QUESTIONS about public life in the contemporary world. We simply ask the lecturers to do this in a way that will help us think as Christians about life in both its complexity and its unity. This, we believe, is in keeping with Kuyper's own efforts to strengthen the Christian witness and, thus, is a fitting tribute to his legacy.

## Why Abraham Kuyper?

Kuyper is not the only significant Christian political leader to have appeared in the last two centuries. He was certainly unusual, however, in the way he deployed his diverse range of talents to advance a Christian understanding of modern life while simultaneously giving political, academic and ecclesiastical leadership in his own country.

Born and raised in a Reformed Church family, the son of a pastor, Kuyper took strongly to books and learning. In 1867, he earned his doctorate in theology at the University of Leiden and then entered the pastorate. A few years earlier, as he was beginning graduate study, he suffered a severe emotional crisis that was resolved by an overwhelming experience of God's grace. It was not until some years after completing his study at Leiden, however, that he had a personal conversion experience that reordered his sense of Christian calling.<sup>1</sup>

Kuyper opened his public career in 1867 by publishing a tract in which he argued for the purity and proper government of the church. For the next two decades the "church question" remained a central concern. In 1870, after meeting the Christian historian and political leader G. Groen van Prinsterer, who became like a second father to him, Kuyper accepted the pastorate of a church in Amsterdam. From

there, he followed Groen into politics and journalism, taking on the editorship of the Christian daily newspaper *De Standard* in 1872 and entering the national parliament at the age of thirty-seven in 1874.

Seeking the reform of both church and politics made Kuyper more and more conscious of the need for distinctively Christian training of those preparing for service in these fields. Accordingly, he began to work for the reform of the laws governing schooling to permit equal treatment of religious schools

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while he took the first steps that would lead to the founding of the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880. For decades thereafter, he served the Free University in both professorial and administrative capacities.

After Groen van Prinsterer died, Kuyper assumed leadership of the fledgling political party that his mentor had founded. During the 1870’s Kuyper brought it to a level of real organization on a popular basis, making it the first “Christian Democratic” party in Europe. Kuyper’s leadership of the party—named the Antirevolutionary Party because of its opposition to the secularist principles generated by the French Revolution—led eventually to his own brief stint as Prime Minister from 1901-04.<sup>2</sup>

“By all accounts,” says James Bratt, “Kuyper was at his best as an orator, which requires that we [Americans] read him with the memory of a [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] speech in mind.”<sup>3</sup> But, as Bratt points out, Kuyper’s many strengths were accom-

panied by significant weaknesses. “Critical genius, passionate logic, spiritual depth, social sympathy, expansive architecture, wit, satire, and hope flood his pages, all encumbered with exaggeration and pomposity, cheap shots and quick generalization. Kuyper was a polemicist who little bothered to control his bias and never used two words when three would do.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1898, Kuyper traveled to the United States at the invitation of Princeton Theological Seminary to deliver the Stone Lectures and to receive an honorary doctorate. The lectures he delivered on that occasion<sup>5</sup> show the scope of Kuyper’s learning and Christian concern. Reformed Christianity is a life-system, he argued, and it challenges other life-systems in every sphere of life—in politics, science, the arts, and more.

## Three Dynamics

### *1. Religion as a Driving Force*

The word “religion” is used most often in America today to refer to organized religious institutions and to the various activities they promote and coordinate. Religion in this sense is then typically placed alongside politics, business, sports, the media, and other efforts, as one among many human activities. As a consequence, politics and the rest of life come to be viewed as non-religious or secular in nature. But this is highly misleading.

Christianity and Judaism, for example, are religions of the Book—a book that speaks to all of life, not merely to the life of organized churches and synagogues. Moreover, and equally important, the ways of life that are followed by many people who may not call themselves religious are functionally equivalent to religious ways of life. Major movements and ideologies of the twentieth century, including nationalism,

Communism, Fascism, individualism, socialism, and secularism, have functioned publicly much like the influential religions of the past. They require faith in certain basic principles; they organize all (or most) of life around their central aspirations; and they contend with one another for control over most, if not all, areas of life, including politics, education, science, technology, and the media.

Religion, therefore, has not faded away or been sidelined, as many modernists believe. Instead, new religions—many of them thoroughly humanistic and this-worldly in character—have arisen to contend with one another as well as with more traditional religions like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. This fact is not always evident to us in the west, because Christianity and Judaism have often accommodated themselves to modernist movements in different ways. In some cases, Christians and Jews have, in practice, accepted a secular/sacred, public/private division of life that seems to mitigate the religiously deep conflicts.

But in many parts of the world, and now increasingly in the United States, this accommodation to secularizing tendencies, driven by non-theist substitute religions, is coming under severe criticism. Muslims in many countries are attacking outright all forms of secularism. In parts of the West, the

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battle lines are not always that sharp. But particular issues in public debate often reveal deeper levels of world-view conflict. These include debates over the sacredness or the mere utilitarian usefulness of the natural environment, over abortion and the sacredness of human life,

and over the control of schooling due to disagreements about fundamental issues of human identity, human sexuality, and the origin of the universe.

Kuyper was an astute critic of the idea that religion is only one among many human activities. He often criticized the belief, which took hold in the West following the French Revolution, that religion can be confined to a private sphere and that other areas of life can be treated as religiously neutral (or non-religious) and managed through a secular consensus. He well understood that the very idea of a radical division of life into sacred and secular compartments emerges from a comprehensive worldview at odds with Christianity. This Enlightenment notion functions as a religious driving force, which, when successful, takes control of human hearts and minds. The modern era, Kuyper maintained, simply cannot be understood without grasping the significance of the driving force of competing religions—religions both ancient and modern, both theist and secularist.

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“If everything that is exists for the sake of God,” Kuyper argued, “then it follows that the whole creation must give glory to God. The sun, moon, and stars in the firmament, the birds in the air, the whole of Nature around us, but, above all, man himself, who, priestlike, must consecrate to God the

whole of creation, and all life thriving in it ... The sacred anointing of the priest of creation must reach down to his beard and to the hem of his garment. His whole being, including all his abilities and powers, must be pervaded by the *sensus divinitatis*.”<sup>6</sup> This insight was not original with Kuyper, to be sure, but he is one of the few leaders to pursue its implications so persistently within many spheres of modern life.

We might say that Kuyper, following Augustine, recognized that life is driven and shaped at the deepest level by competing “loves” that motivate and guide people. Christian faith made possible by the love of God through Christ is one such driving force, and Christians profess that the power of God’s love challenges all other religions—all other loves—with its light. What does this mean for a Christian understanding of our world today? How should the light of God’s love in Christ both illumine our interpretation of history and guide our actions in history? We hope the Kuyper Lecture series will help us answer these important questions.

## 2. *Christ, the Light of the World*

The second task of the Kuyper Lecture is to help enlarge our understanding of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. If the true way of life has been opened by the incarnate Son of God, then the implications of this dynamic movement must be as comprehensive as life itself. The apostles explain that all things were created in and through and for the one who became flesh in Jesus. Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of God as Lord of the whole creation stamp reality with the truth about its deepest meaning and ultimate destiny.

Christianity, therefore, is more than the affirmation of a dogma, more than personal piety, more than an orientation of

the soul toward unseen transcendence or an afterlife. Living by Christian faith is a way of life based on the conviction that God, in Christ, has created all things and is directing all things toward the day of God's climactic revelation. Thus, everything has meaning and value in history. Political life, too, has its unique revelatory character and proper calling from God.

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Kuyper put it this way: “The son [of God] is not to be excluded from anything. You cannot point to any natural realm or star or comet or even descend into the depth of the earth, but it is related to Christ, not in some unimportant tangential way, but directly. There are no forces in nature, no laws that control those forces, that do not have their origin in that eternal Word. For this reason, it is totally false to restrict Christ to spiritual affairs and to assert that there is no point of contact between him and the natural sciences.”<sup>7</sup> No sphere of human life, as Kuyper saw it, “is conceivable in which religion does not maintain its demands that God shall be praised, that God’s ordinances shall be observed, and that every *labora* shall be permeated with its *ora* in fervent and ceaseless prayer.”<sup>8</sup>

Kuyper emphasized the need for a comprehensive Christian worldview that would allow for an “architectonic” or structural critique of the creation’s disorder and lead to a multidimensional approach of human service to God and neighbors in all spheres of life. Each human responsibility has its own God-given characteristics and responsibilities. None can be reduced to the other. None can be ignored or discarded by Christians. All of them hang together in one creation order—in a single, natural-social “ecosystem”—before the face of God.

The primary focus of the Center for Public Justice is on the political arena—on government, law, and civic responsibility. From a Christian point of view we ask, “How ought human beings to act in this arena?” To answer a question like this requires that our interpretation of government and politics be guided by a larger vision of the unity and diversity of life so we can see politics in its relation to other spheres of human responsibility in the single creation order.

Jesus Christ, Savior of the world, is Lord of all. This confession has everything to do with political life on earth, and Christ’s relation to earthly polities and governments is connected with the truth about God’s entire creation, of which Christ is Judge, Redeemer, and Lord. The Christian quest for political wisdom sufficient to guide responsible action must be one that appreciates both the lordship of Christ over all things and the particular meaning of politics and government.

Finally, if, as Christians believe, Jesus Christ is coming again for final judgment and the transfiguration of reality into a new

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heaven and earth, then the history of creation entails an eschatological orientation that must have a bearing on everything that happens here and now. What does it mean, therefore, to fulfill one’s civic responsibilities with a view to Christ’s second coming? In what sense should the Christian hope of final redemption give realistic shape

to worldly politics, which often appears to be controlled more by sin than by redemptive hope?

These are some of the questions we hope Kuyper lecturers will address over the years.

### *3. An International Christian Community*

Ever since the apostle Paul began to preach the gospel to the gentiles, the international dynamic of the Christian community has been at work. Followers of Jesus Christ bear allegiance to someone higher than a family elder, a local dignitary, or a national god. The bonds of faith, hope, and love in Jesus Christ are fashioned by the work of the Holy Spirit, and they call believers into a kingdom that transcends all earthly boundaries. Moreover, biblical revelation conveys the promise that God's kingdom will endure when all else fails. The final and complete appearance of this kingdom will mark the end of history as we know it and will usher in the glory of the Lord.

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This is Christian faith. This is the hope that compels and nurtures Christ's followers. The bonds of Christian community are the bonds of faith—the same faith that Abraham had when “he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:19-10).

Where and how in our day is the community of Christian faith growing, enduring, and remaining faithful in service to

God? The bonds of sin and darkness remain strong, even among believers. The false religions of nationalism and materialism easily entrap us. Syncretism with other faiths weakens the faith of those who claim to be Christians. Our lack of discipline as a community of faith holds us back. Nevertheless, the vineyard keeper remains faithful, caring for the vines that bear fruit, grafting in new branches, pruning fruitless ones, and nurturing the whole vineyard.

Without doubt, Kuyper was influenced by various nationalist and parochial spirits of his day. Not everything that he believed and taught should be heeded, and some of it deserves serious criticism. Nevertheless, Kuyper's widest, deepest vision was the same one that has inspired Christians since Christ's first coming—a vision of a Christian community bound together across all borders and nationalities, serving the Lord and neighbors in the power of the Spirit.

“It is the precious comfort for the lonely heart,” Kuyper wrote in his book on the Holy Spirit, “that, in all the ends of the earth, among all nations and peoples, in every city and village, God has His own whom He has called out and gathered unto eternal life; and that I share with them the same life, possess the same hope and calling, and sustain to them, however imperceptibly, the tenderest and holiest communion... And therefore this glorious communion should no longer be otherwise than a small company. [The communion of the saints] is not exclusive, but inclusive. It is not an idea which closes the door and shuts the windows; but, throwing doors and windows wide open, it walks through the four corners of the earth, searches the ages of the past, and looks forward to the ages to come.”<sup>9</sup>

What are the constraining spirits that keep us from working wholeheartedly to strengthen the bonds of international Christian community in our day? What are the parochial

blindness that hold us back? What difference does the worldwide community of Christian faith make in the world in which we live? What difference should it be making, especially in the public realms of politics, commerce, industry, the media, science, technology, and the arts? If other religions appear to be exerting greater influence over world affairs, how should Christians respond? What can Christians of different nationalities and languages do to encourage one another? And what approach should Christians take to international law and politics to strengthen bonds of justice among the states and peoples of the world?

The Center for Public Justice is pleased to present the Kuyper Lecture, first to a local and live audience, and then to those around the world who will read the lectures in printed form. We pray that the lectures will make a small contribution to improving the quality of Christian statecraft the world over and that Christians bound together in Christ might gain some new strength in the Spirit for greater service in the world.

# Notes

<sup>1</sup>See James D. Bratt, "Raging Tumults of Soul: The Private Life of Abraham Kuyper," *The Reformed Journal* (November, 1987), and R.D. Henderson, "How Abraham Kuyper became a Kuyperian," *Christian Scholar's Review* (September, 1992), pp. 22-35.

<sup>2</sup>For an introduction to Kuyper's public life, see James D. Bratt, "Abraham Kuyper's Public Career," *The Reformed Journal* (October, 1987); L. Praamsma, *Let Christ Be King: Reflections on the Life and Times of Abraham Kuyper* (Jordan Station, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1985); McKendree R. Langley, *The Practice of Political Spirituality: Episodes from the Public Career of Abraham Kuyper, 1879-1894* (Jordan Station, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1984). Recent Dutch publications on Kuyper include: G. Puchinger, *Abraham Kuyper: De Jonge Kuyper (1837-1867)* (Franeker: T. Wever, 1987); R. Kuiper, *Herenmuiterij: Vernieuwing en Sociaal Conflict in de Antirevolutionaire Beweging, 1871-1894* (Leiden: J.J. Groen en Zoon, 1994); J. de Bruijn, *Abraham Kuyper: Leven en Werk in Beeld: Een Beeldbiografie* (Amsterdam: Historisch Documentatiecentrum, Vrije Universiteit, 1987); J. Stellingwerff, *Kuyper en de VU* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1987).

<sup>3</sup>Bratt, "Abraham Kuyper's Public Career," pp 11-12.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 11. An important speech that Kuyper gave at the opening of the first Christian Social Congress of 1891 has recently been retranslated and published as *The Problem of Poverty*, ed. James W. Skillen (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1991). A wide-ranging collection of Kuyper's speeches and essays, some of them translated for the first time, have been edited by James D. Bratt: *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Excerpts from two of Kuyper's speeches can be found in *Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society*, eds., James W. Skillen and Rockne M. McCarthy (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1991), pp. 235-64.

<sup>5</sup>Kuyper's 1998 Stone Lectures were published as *Lectures on Calvinism*, 12th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982). An excellent introduction to the lectures and Kuyper's life and thought is presented by Peter S. Heslam in his *Creating a Christian World View: Abraham Kuyper's "Lectures on Calvinism"* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>6</sup>To illustrate continuing, worldwide interest in Kuyper, I am deliberately quoting here from a recent Indian edition of Kuyper's Stone Lectures, edited by Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Crown of Christian Heritage* (Landour, Mussoorie, U.P. India: Nivedit Good Books Distributors, 1994), p.53.

<sup>7</sup>Kuyper, *You Can Do Greater Things Than Christ*, trans. Jan H. Boer (Jos, Nigeria: Institute of Church and Society, 1991), p. 74. This is the translation of a section from the first volume of Kuyper's *Pro Rege, of Het Koningschap van Christus* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1911).

<sup>8</sup>Kuyper, *The Crown of Christian Heritage* (see note 6 above), p. 54. One of the best expositions of Kuyper's understanding of the basis for organized Christian action in all spheres of life is S.U. Zuidema's "Common Grace and Christian Action in Abraham Kuyper," in Zuidema, *Communication and Confrontation* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1972), pp. 52-105.

<sup>9</sup>Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri de Vries (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908), p.550.



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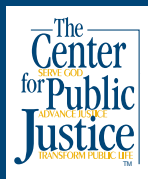
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