

Kuyper as Democrat: The Theological Background

By Kees van der Kooi¹

Editorial Comment: Kuyper was motivated by the democratization of society. Van der Kooi shows how this drive emerged from Kuyper's theology, namely, his vision on divine sovereignty, the doctrine of election and that of the Holy Spirit.

Kuyper was a democrat. If there is one ongoing theme in Kuyper's pleadings and initiatives for the renewal of society and its institutions, it is that of democratization or his striving for the expansion of the suffrage. He functioned as a crowbar in a society governed by a small elite from top to bottom, i.e., top-down. For this he was not appreciated; he was, in fact, hated for it, traces of which can still be detected. Was he not the man who divided the church and disturbed the unity of the young nation? In his book *De zeven levens van Kuyper*, Johan Snel² has characterized this striving for democratization as the kernel of Kuyper's thought and action and gives it a historical colouration. In an interview in 1907, Kuyper tells how as a young man he was present in 1848, when in Middelburg a proclamation took place at City Hall of the new constitution in which the rights of Parliament, of the people and of the King were placed on a new footing.

Universal suffrage was still distant, but the struggle against control by a small liberal elite and for democracy had begun. The suffrage was restricted to those men who occupied a certain social level and paid taxes. At a time of powerful populism as we experience today, the arguments against universal suffrage were tempting in a certain way. Were day workers and the poor not an easy prey for demagogues and for the promise of bread and games? Was it not dangerous to extend the suffrage to all? A democratic system with suffrage beyond the elite was full of risks. Kuyper nevertheless proceeded with his preference for universal suffrage, while in the eyes of others this was too radical and dangerous. In 1894, this caused a break in the Anti-Revolutionary Party. De Savornin Lohman, a comrade of

¹ Original title: "*Kuyper als Democraat: De Theologische Achtergrond.*" Dr. Van der Kooi is/was emeritus professor of Systematic Theology at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam as well as associated with the Erasmus Institute of Economics and Theology in the Netherlands.

² See Snel's article in this series.

Kuyper,³ was of the opinion that Kuyper's course of action would lead to political power on basis of pure individualism and that it would endanger the most important function of Parliament and Government to promote the interest of all. This break resulted in a group called "Free Anti-Revolutionaries,"⁴ later to be renamed as "Christian Historical Union."⁵

Theology

Where did this striving after democratization come from? It is tempting to point to Kuyper's own origin and search for a sociological cause. There would be good reason for such an approach. His grandfather was a brush maker and his father a pastor or preacher within a modest social place and without capital. But there is another reason and that is what I want to discuss: the theology. Kuyper has explicitly laid the relationship between his fundamental theological convictions and his striving for democratization, meaning his attempt to give all adult citizens an opportunity to influence the direction of church and nation on basis of their citizenship. This background is determined by what Kuyper described as the sovereignty of God and the doctrines of election and of the Holy Spirit. I will refer to a few aspects of his thought in which this relationship is brought to the fore.

I begin with the lecture with which he crisscrossed the country in 1874, namely, "Calvinism: the origin and guarantee of our civil liberties."⁶ The later professor Herman Bavinck was one of the many who listened to this lecture and wrote home about it enthusiastically. This enthusiasm was understandable when one takes into view what Kuyper does in this lecture. He points out the direction for a movement that will not lock itself in between the alternatives of the individualism of the French revolution and the state absolutism of German intellectuals, but that feeds upon the fountain of Reformation theology. To escape those alternatives he adduces an element in the Reformed theological tradition that has functioned as its hidden magnetic centre, namely the idea of God as the sovereign Lord of all creation.

God's Sovereignty

³³ The double last name suggests the man was a member of the elite.

⁴ "Vrij Antirevolutionairen."

⁵ "Christelijke Historische Unie" or "CHU."

⁶ "Het Calvinisme, oorsprong en waarborg van onze burgerlijke vrijheden."

The recognition of divine sovereignty means, according to Kuyper in this lecture, that the roots of constitutional law lie neither in the king nor in the citizens, but in God. This was not a new opinion; he adopted it from Groen van Prinsterer.⁷ He delves deeper into this principle and uses it in his attempt at social renewal. It means that all power and authority in society is subject to a higher criteria, not to itself. He said:

From this confession it follows that all power and authority on earth is not inherent but is imposed or endowed so that by nature it is not a matter of the sovereignty of either king or people. Only God Almighty is sovereign; compared to Himself, He considers all creatures, whether born in a royal palace or in a beggar's hovel, as nothing. The authority of one creature over another is first of all, if God indeed endows it, not inherited but to be used for His honour. He is totally free to grant that authority to whomever He wills. Sometimes He gives it to kings and princes; sometimes to nobles and patricians; but sometimes just as readily to the people themselves. A democracy as in America is for Him just as useful for the display of His sovereign glory as is Russian absolutism. The primary question is not whether the people rule or the king but whether they do so in obedience to Him.

This citation is meaningful because various forms of government come along without any talk of preference. However, one thing is clear by now: no form of government is absolute or can claim legitimacy on its own. Every form of government is in principal an instrument of God as the power to which every form has to subject itself, not matter which form. All authority is relativized by being related to God as its source. Every authority has to mirror divine right and justice and must be prepared to be corrected by that. For the Neo-Calvinist tradition this position means that it never bows blindly for the power of any other authority. There was always the standard of a higher divine right. Respect for the authority of the king does not rest in the king's person. Kuyper was very clear at this point; the person of the king or other authoritative person was always disappointing. It was respect for the official office, which literally means something like an imposed function.

⁷ Another double elite name.

Election and Empowerment

As a result of the above stance, power and authority have been placed under strict conditions. Together with divine sovereignty as source of all power and authority there is also the doctrine of election. It is characteristic for Kuyper that in his 1874 lecture he does not restrict the doctrine of election to one that deals only with eternal salvation and damnation. He points explicitly to the theme of election as a doctrine from which emerges enormous ethical and anthropological power.

“Anyone believing in election knows that he has been chosen for a purpose and therefore has an ethical calling, a calling, because it is of divine origin, may even demand one’s greatest sacrifice. But it is also a calling that will help him succeed, since it is the sovereign God who has called him. Thus, he does not hesitate or ponder long before taking on the task and proceed.”

In the awareness of election there is no ground for fatalism or resignation, but, according to Kuyper, only a ground for mobilization that gets the task done. To put it in contemporary terms, Kuyper uses the doctrine of election as a means of empowerment. This doctrine, together with other terms, is embedded in a certain spirituality that calls for an attitude of ownership, alacrity and briskness. It serves as a stimulation and certain trust in one’s own calling and the dignity of taking on the things of this life. Everyone *may* not only participate, but everybody is called to participate actively and make his contribution. Gereformeerd activism has a theological basis.

The Centre of Gravity

The result of the above citation makes clear that this spirituality of election is not restricted to the church, but is also out there in the world. It calls for a specific form of organization in which power is not hierarchical.

“A church that confesses election as ‘*cor ecclesiae*’ cannot be clerically dominated, but must find its power in the elect, that is, in the members of the congregation. The principle of democracy in the church flows out of this confession that later spilled over onto the terrain of the state and called for the liberties of the Dutch citizens, of the English Whigs and, no less, of Americans.”

In other words, the relationship in church and society cannot be structured in a top-down fashion, from top to bottom. The centre of gravity lies with the members. As Kuyper put it, what first began in the church and was practiced there, later spilled over into the society.

As mentioned earlier, not all members of the Anti-Revolutionary movement felt at home in this strong tendency towards democratization. A part of the movement continued to place their trust in the traditional authority structures, institutes and in an oligarchic form of directing society. This allegedly would better serve society as a whole and would submerge group interests to a lower level. De Savornin Lohman serves as a model for this choice, but Kuyper moves into a different direction. He will try more and more to mobilize the people, to make the radical choice for democratization, for expansion of the suffrage and therewith place the power in the hands of the electorate. Kuyper feels at home with the ordinary people and moves towards the emancipation of the ordinary people⁸ and the organization of a sociological midfield between citizen and government. Responsibilities must as much as possible rest with the citizenry. The confession that each believer stands directly before God must shift the centre of gravity of authority and responsibility. In his Stone Lectures of 1898 Kuyper said, “Every child of God must enter into direct fellowship with Him and serve Him in all his dimensions.” Thus, here an important religious and theological element of the Reformation bears fruit for theorizing about the structure of the society. The responsibilities for the family, the church, occupation, education, industry, medical must be laid as closely as possible to the people affected. This is not about separate individuals, but about the primary relations in which individuals live and work: family, trade, calling, region, scholarship, art. This means a *de facto* preference for pluralism and, in theory at least, a restricted role for the government.

I say, “in theory.” The reality turned out much more difficult and complex. The government needed to play a much greater role in the fields of medical care, education, rules for the economy, etc. The structures of this corporate social vision are recognizable even today in Dutch society: to grant the various parts of the society their own space as much as possible.

Schleiermacher and the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

⁸ The classic traditional term among Kuyperians here is “kleine luyden”-- “little people.”

Where does this democratization tendency in modern Calvinism come from? Does this really come only from Calvin, who himself was firmly stuck in hierarchical structures? It is exceedingly fascinating in this context to take a look at the minutely published *Commentatio* written by Jasper Vree and Johan Zwaan, the book with which Kuyper as a young theologian in 1860 won a writing contest at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. The assignment of the contest was to write a comparison between the doctrine of the church as conceived by Johannes a Lasco, a Polish theologian (1499-1560), and that of John Calvin (1509-1564). In contrast to what one might expect, it was not Calvin who was preferred by Kuyper, but a Lasco who won the highest honour. The latter provided the direction to what a Christian church would mean for the internal life of the church and for the wider community. But behind this preference for this Polish leader of the refugee congregation in Emden, northwest Germany, there is another figure who, according to Kuyper, played a prominent role in the development of the doctrine of the church, namely Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), the genial theologian at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

His central thought is that the congregation is a community inhabited by the Holy Spirit in which the members build up each other through love and mutual service. It is the Spirit of Christ who has poured a new life principle into the human community. It is this Spirit who takes possession of the members of the community. In his narrative titled *Weinachtsfeier*, Schleiermacher describes what this means. All members of a conventicle that meets on Christmas Eve have a contribution to make. No matter how different from each other, young or old, men or women, they all have something to contribute, everyone in her or his own way. In all this diversity the work of the Spirit becomes manifest.

The young Kuyper embraces the idea that all members of the congregation have a part in the Spirit of Christ. Still in the line of Schleiermacher, Kuyper writes that “the bonds that bind the member of the church to each other is neither baptism nor a certain confession, but solely and only the divine Spirit of Christ.”

With Schleiermacher this is connected to an enormous trust in the penetration of the Holy Spirit in society. When the Christian congregation in her life and movement is inhabited by the Spirit of Christ, then this must and will spill over into the general society. Everyone has a part of this Spirit. It is a programme of

democratization and universalization of humanity, that is rooted in ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. In the young Kuyper this becomes concrete in a proposal revolutionary for his day, namely that the elders in a church must be chosen by all the members, including the women. Women are also to receive the passive suffrage to the diaconate.

Critique

The Holy Spirit serves as a direct link between God and humans. We meet that link also in Kuyper's *Stone Lectures* from 1898. It gives a democratization dynamic to Kuyper's thought that makes it possible to point to inconsistencies against his statements elsewhere, where he too strongly represents Euro-centric thinking in the gender theories of his day.⁹ I cite:

“Since Calvinism places all human life directly before God, it follows that everyone, man or woman, poor or rich, weak or strong, talented or otherwise, as God's creatures and lost sinners, have nothing to pretend over against each other, and before God and thus amongst each other all are equal as individuals and as a nation.... That is the reason Calvinism condemns not only slavery and the caste system, but just as decisively all stealth slavery of the wife of a poor man, and is opposed to all human hierarchy and has no patience for any other aristocracy than that which demonstrates superior character or talent by the grace of God, whether personal or gender.”

These are words in which the democratic dynamic of Kuyper is clearly visible.

Common Grace

Kuyper did not leave the programme of the universalizing of humanity, not even once he took on the Calvinist posture. This theme returns in the theory of Common Grace that he developed later and that stood him in good stead as member of the Cabinet. There is an operation of God's grace that prevents the sinful world from collapsing. What is more, that operation sees to it that the divinely created potentials for knowledge, scholarship and culture are developed and come within the reach of those who were previously excluded. The progress of scholarly and technical potentials, the struggle against social injustice and the call

⁹⁹ See the article by Hillie van de Streek in this edition of Sophie.

for influence of all citizens is not a mere happenstance nor an accidental business development that should not have happened, but have their ground in God's gracious plan for His creation. Kuyper's democratic tendency and political struggles in that direction are not merely reflections of the modern notion of progress, in which he was more progressive than most of his contemporaries, but have their ground in and feed from fundamental theological positions.