

Kuyper on Faith and Science¹

By Ab Flipse²

Editorial Comment: Science without faith does not exist, according to Kuyper. He saw no conflict between faith and science. The more pluralistic science is, the better. But what was the specifically Christian in his view of science? Ab Flipse bares for us the most important characteristics in a scientific historical research.

Abraham Kuyper's views on faith and science are both intriguing and original, but, because of their radical nature, also controversial. Central to Kuyper's thought is the ideal of a Christian scholarship. This ideal forms the most important justification for the founding of the Vrije Universiteit (VU) in Amsterdam in 1880, and also played an important role in the founding and development of other Christian scholarly institutions internationally. It inspired deep-going reflection on the theme of faith and scholarship, but at the same time it sometimes led to misunderstandings and useless discussion that did not always lead to further development around that relationship. Not every scholar could work with the ideal, especially because it did not serve as the point of departure in concrete cases of collision or harmony, but called for a radically different perspective on the problematics.

The purpose of this article is to shortly explain what was comprised in Kuyper's perspective. I choose here to approach the subject from a historical perspective of scholarship and discuss Kuyper's vision against the background of the debate about faith and scholarship and the developments in the scholarship of the late nineteenth century. This will make it clear which kind of perspectives Kuyper entertained, both in which he could agree with his contemporaries and in which he differed from them. Though Kuyper himself did not offer a mature vision on scholarship, his perspectives display sufficient unity to be used as a point of departure for a Neo-Calvinist reflection on faith and scholarship that eventually

¹ The Dutch term used here is "*wetenschap*," which often covers both "science" and "scholarship" In this translation I use both of them indiscriminately.

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was worked out in various directions. At the end I offer a few observations on the subject.

Faith-coloured Scholarship

The startup of Kuyper's approach becomes clear from his famous lecture "*Sphere Sovereignty*,"³ that he delivered at the opening of the VU. In this lecture he not only defended the right of free universities to exist, but he also sketched the ideal of the practice of scholarship in all disciplines coloured by faith, for there is not one single centimetre in the entire area of human life over which Christ, the Sovereign of all, does not claim as "Mine." This is thus a challenge to Christians not to regard science and faith as separate worlds and to get to work in the field of scholarship.

During the next decennia Kuyper further developed his ideas about scholarship. He wrote about it in his *Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid* (1893-1894); lectured about it in his *Stone Lectures* at Princeton (1898); delved deeper into some themes in his lectoral lectures. Among them "Evolution" (1899) and many articles in his *De Heraut*, all bundled in a number of larger publications such as *De gemeene Gratie* (1902-1904). This much is clear: the development of scholarship caught his full attention.

In his *Stone Lectures* about Calvinism and scholarship we find an important point of departure:

Note well: I am not talking about the *conflict* between faith and scholarship. That does not exist. *All scholarship is based on faith*, while the contrary, faith from which no scholarship emerges, is superstition but not faith. All scholarship takes for granted faith in our ego, our "I," in our self-consciousness; assumes faith in the correct working of our senses; assumes faith in the correctness of our laws of logic, in the general aspects of special phenomenon, in faith in life and, above all, faith in the principles that serve as our points of departure."⁴

No Conflict

³ Original: "*Souvereiniteit in eigen kring.*"

⁴ Translation by Boer; not from a published version.

Kuyper turned against the popular opinion of the time that there existed a conflict between faith and science, a vision that has become known, at least in the Netherlands, as the “conflict- or war thesis.”⁵ In the English-language regions that vision was expressed in publications such as those by the chemist John William Draper’s *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874), that was aimed especially against the Roman Catholic Church. Then there was Andrew D. White’s *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896). White sketched an image of a centuries-long intellectual war during which scholarship slowly disentangled itself from oppression at the hand of the orthodoxy of the day.

Not Neutral

This kind of conflict theory was not uncommon either among the liberal Dutch elite. The scholarship that had so disentangled itself from faith was, according to them, neutral and was to keep religion far from mixing with it. In contrast, Kuyper declared that there was a close connection between science and faith, while he tied faith to basic intuitions like principles that were rooted in a person’s worldview. Thus worldviews serve a forming power in the development of scholarship.

Pluralism

Kuyper noted that during his own life time society and culture had become pluralistic, something he valued positively. That pluralism should have had an effect on scholarship, within which the thoughts of different schools would stand next to and over against each other, for “friction, fermentation, struggle are the attributes of all expressions of life at a higher level in our present period.” It is through these processes that scholarship can advance.

One contrast that Kuyper saw as the most fundamental because this was at its deepest religious, was that between naturalistic and Christian scholarship or, as he put it in his *Stone Lectures*, the scholarship of the “normalists” and that of the “abnormalists.” Normalists view the cosmos *as is* as normal; they have a closed worldview in which there is only room for natural data and laws. Everything must fit in the same basic world perspective and must be explained according to “the logical consequences of cause and effect.” Over against that, abnormalists have an

⁵ Original: “*the conflict- of oorlogstheze.*”

open worldview in which the cosmos is seen as creation and the human race as the image of God. They have an eye for sin as well as for restoration through the wonder of God's continuing relationship to this world.

Where did this contrast in scholarship come from? Just as the conflict thinkers mentioned earlier did in their own way, Kuyper pointed to history. For centuries, so Kuyper averred, abnormalists were almost unchallenged in the world of writing. Kuyper found that this unpacked positively for scholarship. Calvinism especially had encouraged interest in scholarship and had freed it from unnatural restraints. However, since the revolutionary development in the previous century, the role were reversed. Now the normalists dominated scholarship. Though he acknowledged the right to work out naturalistic assumptions, he resisted attempts by normalists to force their perspectives on the abnormalists: "We only defend free scholarship over against her tyrannical twin sister."

Contours of Christian Scholarship and Science

Because of his critique on the conflict thesis as well as his plea for pluralism, Kuyper's general idea ran directly against the dominant scholarship idea that assumed only neutral scholarship. Of course, more needed saying than that Christian science had the right to exist. The idea of Christian scholarship needed to be filled in more. What was he thinking when he used this concept? For this purpose he sketched its contours in various places.

Kuyper emphasized that there was no need to construct a Christian scholarship a priori, but that the tradition that had blossomed in earlier times could be continued. The issue at that time as it is now was not only theology, though the difference there was the most obvious. The underlying worldview had also penetrated other disciplines. This was not only the case for the non-scientific disciplines, in which the subject would usually participate, but also for the humanities. It was in the nineteenth century that a reversal took place that, according to Kuyper, was especially driven by worldviews. Contemporary historians of science also point to this transformation in nineteenth-century scientific research, including the religious angle. While until that time scientific research was seen as a pillar of natural theology, its value now shifted to seeing it as the engine of progress. In addition, scholarship was now regarded as a

professional, often specialist activity, in which a sort of “internal secularization” took place. For an explanation for the rise of the conflict theory, presently people point to similar social developments.

Agreements

We do not find this analysis of the background development with Kuyper. His approach was much more normative. On the one hand, he critiqued the profound religious turn-about that had occurred, but, on the other hand, he had great appreciation for many scientific developments. Not everything in Christian scholarship needed to change. As Kuyper put it, there existed a “broad terrain of research” where there would be no difference. In the humanities, for example, it was all about determining facts and events, while in the natural sciences it was about the empirical side of research—observation, weighing and mathematics. Besides, said Kuyper, everyone uses the same logic in which the development of theory was partially “neutral terrain.” With this, entire disciplines came to the surface:

What astronomers or geologists, physicists or chemists, zoologists or bacteriologists, historians or archeologists bring to light, provided it be severed from the hypotheses with which they undergirded it and from the conclusions they drew from them, must be controlled as fact and then, once so accepted, be taken up in the whole of your scholarship.⁶

Whatever followed after that—development of theory, philosophical reflection—was just as much part of scholarship and that’s where definite differences would become visible:

As soon as one climbs up from this *lower* terrain to *higher* scholarship, the subject begins to participate with subsequently the differences surfacing that exist between the natural and the humanities. This happens not only in theology, but also in the humanities and thus also in the philosophical perspectives current in the natural sciences.⁷

⁶ Kuyper, *Het Calvinism*, p.132.

⁷ A. Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie in Wetenschap and Art*, Amsterdam, 1905, 28 Compare also the analysis of Del Ratzsch, “Kuyper’s Philosophy of Science,” in Jitze van der Meer (ed.), *Facets of Faith and Science*, vol. 2, Lanham, 1996, pp. 1-32.

Kuyper was not interested in distinguishing two kind of scholarship in an artificial manner or to saddle Christians with the assignment to do something different in each discipline. What he resisted was the severance of scholarship from its Christian roots that led to the results automatically being absorbed in a naturalistic worldview. Kuyper wanted each scholar to be conscious of the framework within which the work was carried out. Research was to occur “in the full reflection of the entire worldview” and Christian scholarship had therefore the task “to research the art work of the Supreme Builder and Artist.”

Once reality was no longer regarded as creation, it was replaced by the idea of a machine functioning autonomously. Such a mechanistic perspective about nature left no room for an involved Creator, Kuyper thought. God either disappeared from the screen or was reduced to a *deus ex machine*, that is, an incidentally intervening Supreme Being.

Differences

What alternative did Kuyper offer? Especially in artful and metaphoric manner, he would speak in various places about the relation between God and nature, amongst others, in a reflection about God’s providence. He pointed here to “the image of a steam engine.” Another image was more fitting: “A palace in which not a single spindle or wheel or cylinder works, but wherein a king sits enthroned.” From there “a royal invisible will works invisibly and is the basic cause of all that takes place from day to day.” And “every element in this nature and every power in such an element, is a servant of the God in His palace, and all these elements and powers are awaiting every command that comes out of His mouth till the very limits of creation.” That was how God was constantly involved in His creation, by means of his omnipresent power in which nature rested from moment to moment. The “pride of naturalism” and of naturalistic science thus was the result especially of severance of nature from God, regarding it as a machine and even viewing natural law as an autonomous power. With this approach Kuyper tried especially to counter those who encouraged deism or supported a worldview in which God was increasingly pushed to the margin as a God-of-the-gaps.

Little Concreteness

For the development of a Christian scholarship this offers few concrete handles. Kuyper restricted himself mainly to general views about the character of science and reality. After all, the working out of his programme had to take place in the practice of scholarly research, concretely, at the VU. Nevertheless, Kuyper himself did research in various subjects, especially in Darwin's theory of evolution, which was *the fulcrum point* at the border between faith and science at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1899, Kuyper devoted a complete lecture to the subject, in which he began by noting that the theory under discussion here has almost begun to function as dogma for his contemporaries. This fit his wider analysis of science, which had the tendency to broaden out into a worldview. Especially Darwin's theory of evolution lent itself for this, for Kuyper characterized this as a "purely mechanical" theory that pretended "to explain everything down from the earliest origin of the cosmos and all its life processes through his monistic mechanism." Some adherents even expanded and applied this view to social and cultural life. Kuyper found the results disastrous because truth and beauty were explained pragmatically and ethics beheaded, while all religion was banned as human self-deceit. Evolution herewith was turned into a new faith, a pseudo-dogma.

Evolutionistic Creation?

Kuyper did not achieve a Christian alternative for evolution. This would require solid study and research and therefore he decided in this lecture to express his desire that a faculty of natural science would soon be realized at the VU. For this purpose, "an expert botanist, zoologist or anthropologist" was needed. The development of a theory along this line once again demanded that "well-founded facts," even if they originated in the Darwinian school, could be adopted.

Might this go so far that even evolution could be absorbed in the faith in God the Creator? Was an evolutionistic creation by God possible? For Kuyper, this question was separate from his own critique of the mechanistic evolution theory. He responded affirmatively, "for we will not push our own style onto the Supreme Builder of the universe. As long as He, not in mere appearance, but in actuality, remains the Master Builder, He also has total freedom of choice in style. Thus, regardless of his sharp position, Kuyper demonstrated here also openness towards existing science. The great principal difference was the worldview framework in which a theory was positioned.

Conclusion

In Kuyper's perspective, scholarship and faith are inseparable from each other; scholarly theories (always) arise in the context of certain worldviews. However, it is possible for the results and theories that arose in one worldview to get a place in another worldview, because to a certain extent they *are* neutral. How far that could go was a point of discussion and definitely with respect to the evolution theory the discussion with Kuyper's general points of departure was not settled. For some later Neo-Calvinist thinkers about faith and scholarship the theory was so emphatically associated with the naturalistic cum mechanistic worldview that they saw no chance to give this a place in a Christian framework.

But VU-biologist Jan Lever, inspired by Kuyper, accepted evolution theory in the 1950s. According to Lever, in his evolution lecture, Kuyper had rejected evolutionism as materialistic doctrine of an autonomous nature, but simultaneously he created room for the acceptance of the evolution phenomenon as part of a nature that functioned in constant dependence on God.

Kuyper had broken through the frameworks of thought and contrasts, thus creating room for a scholarship that could develop without hindrance in harmony with faith. He also had laid his finger on the broader worldview background of scholarship. In the past century, central thoughts of Kuyper have inspired thinkers about faith and scholarship. In the tradition of the Calvinist philosopher, Herman Dooyeweerd, a Christian philosophy has been developed as foundation for a Christian scholarship. Within the school of Reformed epistemology in North America one hears links to Kuyperian insights as with Alvin Plantinga and his critique on naturalism as well as with Nicholas Wolterstorff with his notion of "governing convictions" in the practice of scholarship. Also in the recent research into scientism by Rene van Woudenberg *cum sui* at the VU, Kuyperian insights are recognizable in their analysis of the borders of the terrain of scholarship and its own character. The bottom layer of the Neo-Calvinist tradition started by Kuyper turned out to be fruitful for reflection on faith and scholarship from diverse perspectives.

