

How Abraham Kuyper Became a Kuyperian

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In this article² I shall attempt the task of explaining how and why Abraham Kuyper, unlike so many of his fellow students at Leyden University in the late 1850s, did not end up as a “liberal” theologian, a “dead orthodox” minister, or a “culture-fearing” pietist, but instead became the founder of what is rather cryptically known as “Kuyperianism.”³ As a provisional definition let us say that a person is a Kuyperian if he or she, like Kuyper, seeks to act upon the conviction that “there is not a square inch in the whole domain of human life of which Christ, the sovereign of all, does not call out ‘Mine’”⁴

Although he was considerably more than this, Abraham Kuyper was at least a Christian scholar. Because he lived in one of Europe’s smaller countries, it is easy to view his Christian political, scholarly and journalistic accomplishments as those of a big fish in a small pond. Yet his actions and the great clarity with which he articulated the ideas behind them have caused his influence to spread far beyond the borders of The Netherlands. (There is now a Dr. Abraham Kuyper Association in Korea.) His example motivated Dutch immigrants in setting up Christian educational institutions in North America (such as Calvin College and the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto) and encouraged various thinkers (such as B. B. Warfield and C. Van Til). Through his lectures at Princeton University (1898), his writings (a number of which were soon translated into English) and through the work of other (Dutch) Reformed people, his influence

¹*Christian Scholar’s Review*, xxii:1 (1992), pp. 22-35.

² Without question the “presuppositional” thought of Abraham Kuyper has become extremely influential – some would say dominant – in evangelical scholarship. Yet most Christian scholars not of the Reformed persuasion know rather little about Kuyper himself. In this essay, R.D. Henderson addresses the question of “how Kuyper became a Kuyperian,” drawing heavily on some recently published early correspondence of Kuyper’s. Mr. Henderson is a doctoral student at the free University of Amsterdam.

This essay is the result of research work being done for a dissertation at the Philosophy Department of the Free University, Amsterdam. It has benefited considerably from criticisms made by Peter Heslam of Oxford and Harry Van Dyke of Redeemer College. The translations from the Dutch are mine.

³ In the absolute sense this task is impossible on principle. In my view, its impossibility does not arise from a lack of historical source material or the like, but because no combination of explanatory factors (e.g. historical, social, psychological, economic, aesthetic, etc.) can ever fully explain the course of a human life. God alone comprehends the mystery of human history, and yet it is profitable to study praiseworthy persons in order to imitate in our own unique way the good things they stood for.

⁴ This quotation is taken from Kuyper’s address given at the opening of the Free University, *Souvereiniteit in eigenkring* (Sovereignty in [its] own sphere) (1880). It has not been published in English.

has spread to U.S. evangelicals offering them the idea of “Christ the transformer of culture.”⁵ Kuyper’s work serves as a significant model of Christian scholarship, thought, and organized activity, and as such is a source of instruction.

I shall place my discussion of how Kuyper became a Kuyperian within the following contexts or scenes. The first of these is Kuyper’s family background and the course of his early life. A second offers a glimpse of his goals and achievements, indicating what Kuyperianism meant in practice. A third sketches the background to Kuyper’s “conversion,” namely his early university years and his relationship with his fiancée. The last portrays the attitudes and discovery which made him break with “liberalism” (in all of its forms) and convinced him of the necessity of Christian action on many fronts. At the end of the article I will draw some conclusions and give a brief evaluation of Kuyper’s ideas and achievements.

A word about my method: in reading the accounts of Kuyper’s early transitional phase, such as the one found in his own autobiographical *Confidentie*,⁶ I wondered to what extent they had been stylized to fit a later self-image. With the recent publication of many of his early letters, in *Abraham Kuyper: De jonge Kuyper (1837-1867)*, (*Abraham Kuyper: The young Kuyper (1837-1867)*),⁷ one more way is now available of checking his later statements, at least for self-consistency, with earlier ones, especially since some of the letters were written a matter of days after the events they describe. These sources are supplemented by various other letters, writings and published early sermons. Hence I have relied primarily, though not exclusively, upon a comparison of statements made by Kuyper himself under a variety of circumstances and at different times.

Biographical Introduction

⁵ George Marsden refers in his article, “The State of Evangelical Christian Scholarship” (*The Reformed Journal*, September 1987), to “The triumph – or nearly so – of what may be loosely called Kuyperian presuppositionalism in the evangelical community” (p. 14).

⁶*Confidentie. Schrijvenaam de Weled. Heer J. H. van der Linden* (Amsterdam: Hoeverker and Zoon, 1873) (hereafter cited as *Conf.*) This was a sketch of his early life written in the form of a (long) letter to a friend.

⁷ G. Puchinger (Franeker: Wever, 1987).

Abraham Kuyper was born on October 29, 1837 in a small town at the mouth of the river Meuse, near Rotterdam, called Maassluis. His mother, Henrietta Huber (1802-1881), had worked as a governess before becoming a teacher at a girls' boarding school in Amsterdam. Kuyper's father, Jan Frederik (1801-1882), was a pastor in the state-organized church (*Nederlandsch Hervormde Kerk*) but had come from an uneducated family in Amsterdam.⁸ In 1841 the Kuyper family moved from the parish of Maassluis to that of Middelburg, the provincial capital of Zeeland. After eight years in Middelburg they moved once again, this time to the university town of Leyden. Here the young Abraham received a good education, learning both ancient and modern languages at school. He proved to be an excellent pupil and gained the highest honors. At the time of his graduation from secondary school, for instance, he was valedictorian and spoke on a topic of his choice. His address displayed his keen interest in (German) literature, history and theology. The title of his speech in German was *Ulfila; der Bischof der Visi-Gothen und seine Gothische Bibeluebersetzung*.⁹ In the fall of 1855 Kuyper began studying theology and literature at Leyden University. By 1858 he had finished his first degree, passing exams in literature, philosophy, and classical languages *summa cum laude*.

It was at this time that Abraham first met Johanna Hendrika Schaay (1842-1899) to whom he was soon to be engaged. Johanna was sixteen at the time, and Abraham was twenty-one. Johanna, whose father was a stockbroker, lived in Rotterdam. During their five years of engagement (1858 to 1863) Abraham and Johanna corresponded regularly, leaving an extensive record of their thoughts, ideas and feelings. Their letters are an important source for understanding Kuyper, his character, and the development and changes in his thought during his theological training.¹⁰ In 1863 they were married, shortly before Kuyper became pastor in Beesd.

⁸ Having learned English from foreign sailors, Jan Frederik was enlisted as a young man to translate tracts for an English Methodist missionary, one A. S. Thelwall (1795-1863), who had come to Amsterdam to bring the Gospel to the Jewish people. Appreciating the young man's talents, Thelwall and his Dutch associates arranged for the financing of his further education and training for the ministry.

⁹ "Ulfilas, Bishop of the Visigoths, and His Gothic Translation of the Bible."

¹⁰ A large selection of these letters has recently been published in G. Puchinger's *Abraham Kuyper. De jonge Kuyper (1837-1867)* (Franeker:Wever, 1987) (hereafter cited as *De jonge ...*).

As a young student at Leyden University in the late 1850s, Kuyper was subject to the growing influence of “modern” German and Dutch theology with its new theories about the nature of religion and Scripture. One of the most important theologians at Leyden was J. H. Scholten (1811-1885). Although he respected Scholten greatly, Kuyper did not feel nearly as close to him as to his literature professor, M. de Vries (1820-1892), an eminent scholar of Dutch language and literature. De Vries proved to be an invaluable inspiration to Kuyper and in 1859 suggested that he try to enter a competition announced by the theology department of the University of Groningen for the best essay comparing J. Calvin’s and J. ‘A Lasco’s views of the church.¹¹ Kuyper took up the challenge and worked hard, almost compulsively, for several months in hope of winning the prize. This meant that his time with Johanna in Rotterdam had to be cut even shorter than usual. Finally, in 1860 his labors were rewarded by winning the prize: a gold medal and with it, much honor. Kuyper was left exhausted, and shortly after receiving the prize he began to suffer some kind of head pains, making it almost impossible for him to study. This condition persisted for many months, causing him much grief and worry about the possibility that he might not gain the highest evaluation at his coming final exams. Nevertheless, Kuyper completed his degree in theology (*kandidaats*) in December 1861, *summa cum laude*; by September of 1862 he had turned his prize-winning essay into a doctoral dissertation.

Besides his constant financial worries (Kuyper’s family was not well-off) his great fear in life was that of being stuck in a small church parish somewhere in the countryside for the rest of his life. This helped fuel his restlessness and his uncompromising study habits. Kuyper’s early letters also reveal that he had an untampered will, absolute determination to succeed. He was often unhappy with himself, ill-at-ease in the university world, and disappointed with his fiancée’s slow intellectual development. In 1863, shortly before being called to his first parish of Beesd, a small village between two branches of the Rhine, Kuyper underwent what he calls a “conversion” as a result of reading a novel by Charlotte Yonge called *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853). His four years in Beesd (1863-67) were a period in which he “worked out his salvation with fear and

¹¹ J. ‘A Lasco (1499-1560) was a Polish born-Protestant Reformer, preacher and theologian. He was a close acquaintance of Erasmus and Cranmer. He travelled extensively, holding positions in both Holland and England.

trembling” among the devout, though uneducated, people of this district. It was a time of unlearning some of what he had learned at university, rethinking the essentials of Christianity, and putting together the rudiments of Kuyperianism.

Besides this, Kuyper continued his earlier efforts of tracking down the writings and letters of ‘A Lasco, through correspondence with and occasional trips to the great libraries of Europe. In 1866 he published a two-volume work containing over one thousand pages of writings, hundreds of letters and an extensive introduction to the life and work of ‘A Lasco. While the work was well received, especially by church historians, it did not bring him nearly as much attention as a small pamphlet he wrote the following year.

The pamphlet Kuyper published in 1867 was entitled: *Wat moeten wij doen, het stemrechten onszelf houden of den kerkeradmachtingen? Vraag bij de uitvoering van Art. 23* (What should we do, exercise the vote [in calling pastors] ourselves or authorize the church council? A question about the implementation of Art. 23).¹² In thirty-four pages it discussed a topic of great interest at the time: the question as to the basis, defence and limitations of authority, in and over the church, between the state and the church, as well as between other institutions or entities. Much of the strength of the essay comes from the historical background Kuyper sketches in the process of arguing his points. It combined his learning as a church historian, his skill as an orator, and his strong conviction as an orthodox Christian.¹³ His words struck a deep chord of resonance in a wide but as yet ununified audience.¹⁴ The tract received many favorable reviews and was probably responsible for his being called later that year to the large parish of Utrecht, another university town.

¹² (Culemborg: A.L. Blom, 1867) (hereafter cited as *Wat moeten wij doen ...*) This manuscript was rejected by the first publisher to whom Kuyper offered it. Discouraged, he decided to throw the piece away. Only his wife’s prodding encouraged him to try again.

¹³ This pamphlet is important for the purposes of this article because it marks Kuyper’s transition from “liberal” to “confessional” Christianity and addresses themes which became key elements of Kuyperianism.

¹⁴ In reviewing the pamphlet, P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye mentions that Kuyper, “who was initially an adherent of the Leyden School of theology, now places himself with the orthodox party – which is the fruit of independent research and personal experience.” This was quoted by Groen van Prinsterer in a letter to Kuyper, April 4, 1867. Their correspondence has been published under the title: *Briefwisseling van Mr. G. Groen van Prinsterer met Dr. A. Kuyper 1864-1876*, A. Goslings (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1937). It fills nearly four hundred pages. Now also in J.L. van Essen, ed. *Briefwisseling van Mr. G. Groen van Prinsterer*, vol. V (1990).

One of the reasons Kuyper's treatise had such an impact was the work done previously by the senior statesman, G. Groen van Prinsterer. For many years Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876) had been an activist for church reform and a solitary confessor of Christ in the political arena. He prepared the way for Kuyper by mobilizing the evangelical wing of the church through his years of writing and struggle in church and parliament. During the first decade of Kuyper's and the last of Groen's public career they worked together on a variety of projects and committees. A brief exchange of letters took place between Kuyper and Groen in 1864, but it was not until 1867 that their correspondence shows signs of a growing affinity for one another. Kuyper probably read some of Groen's writings in the important years 1864-1867.¹⁵ Although the venerable historian and political writer affected the course of Kuyper's life and thought deeply, his direct influence began only toward the very end of Kuyper's transitional phase, which is the focus of this article.¹⁶ (Other influences upon Kuyper, e.g., philosophical ones, are not examined in this article because they played a secondary role in forming Kuyper's thinking, in comparison to the early experiences and factors discussed below.)¹⁷

Kuyper's Goals and Achievements

As to the general course of Kuyper's life and thought, I will now summarize some of its main features. Before his death in 1920 at the age of eighty-three, Kuyper had published innumerable scholarly works, pamphlets, newspaper editorials, and sermon collections, as well as several volumes of parliamentary speeches. His personal correspondence was also extensive, revealing a constant flow of ideas, plans and projects. He was an aggressive organizer, active on many fronts. In 1867 he made his first plans to form an association, the *Marnix Vereeniging*, for the study of Reformation history in the Netherlands. He was

¹⁵ Groen sent Kuyper a copy of his major work *Ongeloofen Revolutie* in 1867. This work is now available in English with an extensive introduction and commentary by H. Van Dyke: *Groen van Prinsterer's Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution* (Jordan Station, Ontario: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1989); cf. pp. 55, 83, 267.

¹⁶ I have been preparing a separate article about Groen van Prinsterer. In it I discuss Kuyper's relationship with him in detail, particularly in connection with the origin and development of the so-called "principle of sphere sovereignty."

¹⁷ This is not at all to say that there are no important philosophical or intellectual influences which worked upon Kuyper, but they go beyond the scope of this paper.

active in The Christian National School Union which worked for the freedom of confessional education. Recognizing the need for a well-organized political union, in 1879 he set up the country's first formal political party.¹⁸ In 1880 his Association for Reformed Higher Education realized its goal of founding a Christian university, the Free University in Amsterdam. He helped set up the *Gereformeerde Kerken* (Reformed Churches) whose membership was formed from the people and congregations who, mournfully, felt forced to leave the state-organized church in 1886. He helped focus attention on the plight of the working classes by publishing on the issue¹⁹ and by arranging a conference in 1891. Some of his other noteworthy areas of activity found him serving as chief editor of a national daily newspaper for five decades, as an influential theologian and educator, as a member of parliament (he quit as a pastor and became an elected MP in the 1870s) and as prime minister (1901-1905). He was driven from power in 1905 in the aftermath of a railway strike.

Kuyper made significant long-term contributions towards a restructuring of state and society along pluralistic lines, respecting not only individuals and corporations but also communities of faith or persuasions.²⁰ According to him, these persuasions constituted the basic trends in state or society, such as Protestant, Roman Catholic, socialist, and each was entitled to organize freely and act publicly on a "level playing field." Each persuasion was entitled to have certain institutions of its own, for example schools and labor associations, which were to receive equal treatment from, but were not to be meddled with by the state. No one community could claim to represent the national community as such. Every person belonged first of all to a persuasion contributing to the state. Hence, no group could rightfully claim that its goals and the state's goals were one and the same. While institutions such as church or synagogue should not have control over the state, as persuasions the different communities were fully entitled to exercise their influence upon it. Kuyper believed this would vastly increase everyone's opportunities to express and live out his or her convictions

¹⁸ In fact, Kuyper re-organized the so-called "Anti-Revolutionary" party along democratic lines. As a movement it had already existed for fifty years under the leadership of G. Groen van Prinsterer.

¹⁹ For example, *De Arbeidskwestie en de Kerk* (The Labor Question and the Church) (1871), and his 1891 lectures later translated into English as *Christianity and the Class struggle* (Grand Rapids: Piet Hein, 1950).

²⁰ By "persuasions" (*richtingen*) Kuyper meant the major communities to which everyone belongs by virtue of subscribing to certain religious and intellectual tenets.

in all the areas of life. The open confrontation of convictions, he thought, would show forth the truth of revealed religion all the more.

In his championing of pluralism, Kuyper's abiding concern was the spiritual revitalization of the church and the re-Christianization of the nation. In many ways he would achieve these goals during his life-time. However, his overpowering style, uncompromising convictions and unrelenting mental powers spawned considerable antipathy in the wake of his success. Among the many people today in his own country who otherwise feel little sympathy for this stalwart (with his ideal of Christian action on many fronts), there are those who prize his devotional writings as a storehouse of much spiritual wisdom.

The Background to Kuyper's Conversion

As a pastor's child, Kuyper knew a lot about Christianity at an early age. From what he says later we gather that he had a strong childhood faith.²¹ He respected his father and when the time came to choose his own course of study and profession, he too chose theology and the ministry. At the time Kuyper entered Leyden University its theology department was known for its "progressive" or "liberal" orientation. After two or three years of study his childhood Christian faith had been replaced by a more enlightened one in which "moralism" and "intellectualism" (neology) largely supplanted traditional Christian dogma.²² By "intellectualism" I mean the position which sees development of the intellectual life as the highest good. This orientation also took the form of "moralism" which seeks the moral improvement of the person

²¹ See *De jonge ...* p. 191 and Kuyper's sermon "*Een Band Voor God Ontknoopt*" (A Tie Severed Before God) (1867) in the collection: *Predicatieën, in de Jaren 1867 tot 1873, tijdens zijn Predikantschap in het Nederlandsch Hervormde Kerkgenootschap, gehouden te Beesd, te Utrecht en te Amsterdam* (Sermons given in the years 1867-1873 during his pastorate in the Netherlands Reformed Church in Beesd, Utrecht and Amsterdam) (Kampen: Kok, 1913) (hereafter cited as *Predicatieën*), p. 241.

²² In Kuyper's own words, "Initiated into the academic world, I stood defenceless and unarmed against the powers of negation which, before I had suspected anything, robbed me of my inherited faith. This faith had not rooted itself deeply in my unconverted, self-seeking mind or temperament, and thus it dried up when exposed to the burning heat of the skeptical spirit." (*Conf ...* p. 35). In a letter to Groen van Prinsterer, dated April 5, 1867, Kuyper says that the "modern instruction" at Leyden University caused him "to sink away into complete neologism for four years." In a parliamentary speech made many years later he repeats this: "For years I entertained these illusions of modernism," he says in a speech in parliament *Handelingen der Staten-Generaal. Zitting van 14 Juli, 1902, Eerste Kamer*. This was quoted in J.N. Van Der Kroef's "Abraham Kuyper and the Rise of Neo-Calvinism in The Netherlands," *Church History* (Vol. XVIII, 1948) p. 317.

in the apprehension and nurturing of “the divine” in the human. Kuyper’s intellectual position, which he assumed at Leyden, allowed him to interpret religion (including Christianity) as providing popular forms in which these goals could be pursued by ordinary people.

The newly published correspondence casts a fascinating light on this development. In many of his letters to Johanna we can see that he is trying to initiate her into this new way of thinking about religion, especially at the time she is preparing to make her public confession of faith. He wants her to see its human side and true nature, apart from all the forms and particularities each tradition puts upon it.²³ While she is doing her best to learn from him, a certain level of resistance is apparent in her attitude towards Kuyper’s persistent theologizing. At some points she defers to her own pastor, who was catechizing her, and feels compelled to tell Abraham that she simply disagrees with him and does not want to discuss the matter any further at the moment.

As he embraced this new approach he perceived that it was a whole way of thinking, a comprehensive view which was at stake. Not surprisingly we see in his letters a fairly consistent line of thought manifesting itself in a variety of contexts. We find, for example, that he no longer has room for the supernatural, the transcendence of God, the divinity of Christ, the afterlife, the last judgment, or the superhuman authority of Scripture. Jesus, he says, was merely a human being, although “the divine moral consciousness which is weak and sickly in us was at work in him in full force.”²⁴ On another occasion he tries to make clear to Johanna that God should not really be thought of as out there beyond the stars (transcendent), but as really only manifest in us (immanent).

Realizing the problems that this way of thinking would bring when he became minister in a local church,²⁵ he sought new meanings in the old words. Hence, even though God had now become a purely immanent “moral essence” for Kuyper (*De jonge... p. 147*), he still speaks to Johanna about “desiring to live to

²³ See *De jonge ...* pp. 77 ff.

²⁴ Cf. *De jonge ...* pp. 146-7, 59, 79, 108. He goes on to say that Jesus “is a man and nothing but a man and only as such is his existence important to me – the man Jesus was so great and so perfect, and I, too, am intended to be thus” (*De jonge ...* p. 59).

²⁵ He mentions this problem to Johanna in a letter in 1858 (*De jonge ...* p. 60). Abraham also complains to her in a letter of December 7, 1862 that some churches do not want pastors like himself who are not orthodox (*De jonge ...* p. 172).

the Glory of God,” to stand in “his service,” and to seek constantly “to make one another better and holier” (*De jonge ...* pp. 78-9). In another letter to Johanna, dated October 18, 1858, he explains that he believes God has created humans with “a divine capacity, i.e., with the capacity to become perfect or divine. “By this,” he continues, “I understand not rationality but religious ethical feeling ... the rational and religious feeling in us is God” (*De jonge... p. 59*).

As time went on, the cynical climate of university theology left Kuyper’s faith intellectually parched; yet on the emotional level he was still open, even vulnerable, to things spiritual. Besides emphasizing the need to be more conscious and self-aware, he also stressed the importance of listening to one’s own heart. Doing so seems to have played an important role in Kuyper’s conversion.

Kuyper’s Conversion (1863)

The story is apparently straightforward. Abraham receives a book from Johanna, a novel by Charlotte M. Yonge, *The Heir of Redclyffe*.²⁶ He reads it and is struck by the similarity between the temperament of Philip, a character in the novel, and his own temperament. He sees and understands Philip’s demise as resulting from pride, in contrast to the weaker character, Guy, who eventually triumphs by humble faith and trust in God. Kuyper is deeply moved, repents of his own selfishness and pride, and is converted.

Determining the precise nature of Kuyper’s conversion is difficult. In many ways it appears to have involved a religious “conversion” in the sense in which evangelicals speak of this. The main complication, however, is that he also seems to have had a strong faith as a child. Nevertheless, it is clear from his letters and his own testimony that he had strayed a long way away from the

²⁶ Charlotte M. Yonge (1823-1901) was a Christian novelist brought up under the influence of the Oxford Movement. She spent all her life at Otterbourne near Winchester, England. She received a deep sense of devotion to the church from her father, a close friend of John Keble, a leading figure of the Oxford Movement. Remaining single, she propagated the Christian faith through her countless novels and by teaching Sunday school. It is interesting to note that the Oxford Movement, which flourished in the 1830s and 40s under the leadership of John Keble, J.H. Newman, and E.B. Pusey, was in part a reaction to theological “liberalism.” It was a revival of Anglican high church piety inspired by a new Romantic ideal of primitive Christianity.

faith of his childhood, at least intellectually, during his university period, and that his “conversion” marked a turning point in his life.

In describing himself prior to his conversion, Kuyper uses the expressions “self-satisfied,” “selfish,” “striving,” “thirst for glory,” “hard-hearted,” “flippant,” and “egotistical.”²⁷ Although it is hard to tell to what extent these evaluations applied to him, his letters do reveal a rather obsessive concern for success and the future, unbridled ambition, and an easily wounded pride. But he was also simply strong-willed and highly-strung. As to misdeeds of a character more specific to himself, Kuyper says that he had constructed his own religion, endorsed false virtue, and wanted to come to God on his own terms. Religion was a subject of study and trifling discussion bereft of any notion of sin, or seriousness of life. It was part of a “cool, rigid philosophy” (*Predicatie* p. 242). He characterizes his student years as a departure, a detour away from the “simple and pious” faith he once had as a child (*De jonge...* p. 191, *Predicatie* p. 241). Nevertheless, this childhood faith was not properly adapted as he grew up; it was left “too long without forming a transition to the world and to adolescence – and then came the shock – the childhood faith collapsed ...” (*De jonge ...* p. 192) Later he says, “My being brought to Christ did not come about as a gentle transition from a childlike piety to a blessed feeling of salvation, but required a complete change in my personality, in heart, will and understanding. This makes it understandable that the specific life circumstances which worked together to this end made a particularly deep impression on me and with my conversion determined the direction which my spiritual life had to take” (*Conf.* pp. 35-36). In a letter to Johanna he confesses that he once tried to destroy that same picture of God in her which he himself had possessed during his childhood. “As a man,” says Kuyper, “I found that image again in the good Guy [the character in *The Heir of Redclyffe*] He taught me how one, also as a grown man, could have a childlike faith” (*De jonge...* p. 192).

Yonge’s character Philip spoke deeply to Kuyper’s relentless striving for success, to his fear of failure and to his desire to be better than all his peers. He came to the conclusion that what he was anxious about could never be supplied or satisfied by any of his own efforts. He experienced Philip’s defeat in the story as

²⁷*De jonge ...* p. 186, *Predicatie* p. 241, and *Conf.* pp. 40-41.

“a judgment upon [Kuyper’s] own striving and character,” (Conf. p. 41). Somehow Philip showed Kuyper his own spiritual poverty, bringing him to his knees and “crushing his heart” (Conf. pp. 41-42).

Abraham speaks to Johanna about Guy as if he were a real person to whom he owed an incalculable debt. The contrast of the two characters struck Kuyper in an extraordinary way, breaking down his pride and “opening up [his] heart” (*De jonge ...* p. 186). He gave up his attempts to order things in his own way and found a new openness and peace with God – A God he had not known in his own theological system. He now spoke of a God outside of himself, one who sometimes stood against him, one who spoke, acted and existed on His own terms.

The recognition that his life had been going in the wrong direction was a humbling experience and Kuyper took it and its consequences very seriously. This meant that he had a lot of intellectual backtracking to do, especially in his thinking about God. The process was difficult and painful and came at a moment when he had to go on speaking and expressing what he believed, namely in his newly assumed work as preacher in the village of Beesd.

One aspect of this conversion is especially noteworthy. Through reflection upon his own experiences, Kuyper came to see an interconnection among the previous ideas or attitudes he had held.²⁸ He looked back upon himself not merely as a sinner haphazardly ignoring God and violating His law, but as one who had had his own starting point, worldview,²⁹ and principle of unity. In other words, there was an underlying pattern in his thought which manifested itself in all its elements. Kuyper expresses this in terms of there being a “line” or a “*direction*” in our lives and thought.³⁰ There are “two directions, two paths,” he claims, “open to everyone. Each has its own principle and in the systematic development from that principle, the one necessarily flows forth out of the other, which is a constant order of thought whose internal power and

²⁸ See *Wat moeten wij doen ...* pp. 28-29, where Kuyper first speaks of “direction,” the “coherence of people’s ideas” and of “a man being a unity and living for his principles.”

²⁹ The term “worldview” is taken from his farewell sermon given four years after his conversion, *Predicatie* p. 238. The term, as we shall see later in this paper, became an important and regular item in Kuyper’s thought and vocabulary after 1867.

³⁰ In his farewell sermon he publicly acknowledges that when he arrived in Beesd (1863) he did not have very much to give his (first) congregation since he had just come to a turning-point in his own spiritual development.

coherence really marks it as a life direction ... starting from a ... spiritual orientation of the human heart” (*Predicatie* 1867, p. 239)

Rural Calvinism

This process of transition from a liberal to a confessional Christianity was assisted in an unusual way through his congregation in Beesd. There was a group of people there, mostly unlettered farmers, apparently known by some as the “malcontents” (*Conf.* p. 44), who had a depth of faith and knowledge of Scripture which confounded the young pastor. They were rural Calvinists still living out of the Reformation tradition in this isolated district, nestled between two branches of the Rhine. These people held fast to the faith by insisting upon the use of the Canons of Dordt, the Heidelberg Catechism and the other articles of faith.³¹ In their ungroomed speech Kuyper says he recognized the voice of the Genevan Reformer, with whom he had become familiar while writing his prize-winning essay.

In the course of his regular pastoral visits Kuyper came to the house of a young woman, only seven years his senior, who had been staying away from church and was at first unwilling to receive him.³² When Kuyper enquired as to the reason for her absence she replied forthrightly that it was that he was not preaching the pure word of God. She went on to show Kuyper, her persevering pastor, what he had missed in Holy Scripture and in the Reformed confessions of faith. Kuyper reports that he had many such “discussions” with her and other members of this group, including the headmaster of the local school. He sensed the presence here of a church which had stood the test of centuries. In these simple folk he encountered a cogent Christian faith, a seriousness of conviction and a “well-ordered worldview” (*Conf.* p. 45) of the kind he had never met with

³¹ While few specific details are known about these people, they formed one of many Bible-centered house groups (conventicles) which existed in The Netherlands at the time. Their place and influence was increased by the revival that began in Switzerland under the teaching of Robert Haldane in 1817, and which spread to The Netherlands in the 1820s, the so-called *Reveil*.

Back in 1834, another congregation in a remote part of the far North of the country had helped its pastor in a similar way, to turn back to this confessional faith, viz., H. de Cock in Ulrum, Groningen. De Cock became leader of the Reformed people who seceded from the state-organized church in 1834 (the *Afscheiding*). Many of his followers eventually emigrated to North America.

³² Her name was Pietje Baltus (1830-1914). She followed Kuyper’s career with interest throughout the rest of her life, though she did not always agree with his political activism. Cf. *De jonge ...* pp. 207-211,

before. They forced him to choose between “full sovereign grace,” as they put it, and the escape hatch of the free thought he had still been keeping open for himself. Says Kuyper: “Their obduracy became a blessing for my heart and the rising of the morning star for my life;” “I had grasped but had not yet found the Word of reconciliation” (*Conf.* p. 45). The change was crowned and completed by a new and extensive reading of the works of John Calvin and other church reformers.

Many things are remarkable about this story. First of all, it was people of the rural Netherlands (in the Betuwe region) who taught their future leader some of his most important lessons. Secondly, this experience cemented his affinity with them, “the little people,” who were to become his most faithful supporters. The bond between them and Kuyper was a source of mutual strength and encouragement, and continued so throughout his long career as preacher, teacher and national leader. Thirdly, this affinity with the uneducated country folk was not merely an external connection but took root in Kuyper’s personality, style and faith. He was willing to be taught by uneducated people who had conviction born of Scripture and wisdom born of life. They gave him more than the learned theologians of the university had done.³³

Kuyper’s Discovery

Now we come to the final scene in Kuyper’s working out of Kuyperianism. While serving as pastor in Beesd, and still in his process of transition, Kuyper read a book just published (1864) by his former professor, J.H. Scholten, entitled *Het Evangelienaar Johannes. KritischHistorischOnderzoek*(The Gospel of John. An Historical Critical Investigation).³⁴ Reading this book gave rise to the insight and courage which he needed to break once and for all with his “modernist” past, freeing him from much of the power of the “liberalism” which he had previously imbibed. Kuyper tells us about this some years later, in a footnote to his critical

³³ His basic orientation remained close to everyday life where God could be glorified through ordinary work. M.R. Langley expresses this for the political realm in his book title: *The Practice of Political Spirituality: Episodes from the Public Career of Abraham Kuyper, 1879-1918* (Jordan Station, Ontario: Padeia Press, 1984).

³⁴ (Leyden: AkademischeBoekhandel van P. Engels, 1864).

treatise *Het Modernisme, een Fata Morgana op ChristelijkGebied* (Modernism, a Fata Morgana on Christian Ground).³⁵

As far as I have been able to reconstruct it, the story goes like this. At the time that Kuyper was studying in Leyden (*circa* 1858) and attending lectures, his professor, Scholten, in spite of his “liberalism,” was still teaching the Johannine authorship of the Gospel of John. According to Kuyper, Scholten had given various reasons for holding this view, for example, “so historical were the persons, so internally cogent, so clearly did everything bear the mark of naturalness and authenticity” (*Modernism ...* p. 73), that the Fourth Gospel had to have been written by the Apostle John. Given his close acquaintance with Scholten’s views and arguments it came as quite a shock to Kuyper to find that in his new book (1864) Scholten had totally changed his position on the authorship of John. Naturally Kuyper was interested in knowing how such a radical and swift change of views had come about.

Kuyper’s recent experience had taught him firsthand that there was more at stake in one’s view of God and Scripture than the results of scholarly study alone. In reading Scholten’s new book Kuyper was struck by this and by something Scholten said in the Foreword. Evidently, Scholten’s new position was influenced by a change in his worldview. “Professor Scholten himself acknowledges,” Kuyper writes, “that the main reason for his divergent results is the transition he had made in recent years from a Platonic to a more Aristotelian worldview,” (*Modernism ...* p. 73, note 52). In this Foreword, Scholten says that scholarship in recent years has seen a shift towards the empirical and away from ideal-historical and metaphysical constructions. He is interested in what really happened, interested in the historical Jesus and not in the stories told about Him. The task of the historian is to examine critically the *reports* of facts. Scholten says that his views on John changed as he came to see that “the worldview of the Fourth Gospel writer ... no longer fits into the frame of our contemporary worldview, which rests on an empirical basis” (*Het Evangelienaar Johannes ... 1864* p. IV).

³⁵ (Amsterdam: Hoeverker and Zoon) (hereafter cited as *Modernism ...*) This booklet has never been translated into English although it was translated into German as early as 1872: *Die moderneTheologie (der Modernismus) eine Fata Morgana auf ChristlichemGebiet* (Zuerich: G. Hoehre, 1872).

Undoubtedly Kuyper interpreted Scholten's statement in a different way than Scholten had intended, namely, as a basic religious attitude influencing the results of one's academic work. Unlike Kuyper, Scholten was thinking only about the advancement and correctness of the new "empirically" based worldview which science now rested upon and not about the systematic implications of his statement. At this point, however, Kuyper seized upon the universal structural significance of what Scholten says, namely that a worldview is something which influences scholarship and in this case led Scholten to such a profound and rapid change in views. Kuyper states that, "Through the reading of this book, supplemented by my memories of his enthusiastic delivery of lectures, which made such a deep impression on me, the authority of modern criticism was undone for me" (*Modernism ...* p. 73). In other words, he came to the conclusion that it was primarily a change in "worldview," occasioned by what Scholten calls the new overlook "of our time" and the understanding that the outlook of the Gospel writer(s) was based on an antiquated worldview, that caused Scholten to see the Fourth Gospel in a new light and to draw a new and contrary conclusion about its authorship. "With this," Kuyper notes, "Scholten recognizes an *a priori* as the guiding star of his criticism" (*Modernism ...* p. 73).

Kuyper does not conclude from this, however, that Scholten is a poor scholar doing substandard work. Quite to the contrary, he concludes that Scholten has candidly, if inadvertently, disclosed something of vital importance about every scholar, namely that he or she is dependent upon a worldview. A worldview influences and helps the scholar to conceive and work out new theories and ideas. This recognition of what he calls the "*a priori*" central role that worldviews play in scholarly activity gave Kuyper the courage he required to disagree with an older, more learned scholar like Scholten. By breaking with him he broke with "modern" theology as such. Kuyper's discovery helped him to resist the powerful influence of the intellectual trends of his day.

Conclusions

It is now time to return to the question posed at the outset of this article: How did Kuyper become a Kuyperian? Although I do not pretend to be able to answer this question fully, I have tried to show that the main source from which

Kuyperianism sprang was Kuyper's discovery that human obedience or disobedience to God expressed itself in terms of a direction, course or pattern of life. He first noticed such a pattern while reflecting on his own pre-conversion thought and action. During his period of transition from a liberal to a confessional Christianity, while living in Beesd, he started thinking about the derivation of such patterns. Sometime around 1865 he came to the conclusion that they resulted from the influence of worldviews. While he did not define "worldview" at the time,³⁶ he associated it with a primary set of attitudes about God and the world expressed in (internally unified) answers to the basic questions of life. Hence, he saw religion and worldview as inseparable.³⁷ As such, religion necessarily involves a universal vision of reality which cannot be limited to a private realm but must play a crucial role in thought and action. This means that there is no neutral ground anywhere in life or society but that every terrain is occupied by a religious principle, Christian or otherwise.

Kuyper's conviction that there is a worldview implicit in each religious persuasion, as well as an underlying unity within a person's thoughts and beliefs, led him to conclude that in order to be faithful to Christ, the sovereign Lord, we should try to work out Christian ideas and plans of action in all spheres of life. Kuyperianism arose with the recognition of the coherence of things, the inter-coherence of our thinking and believing, and the unity of faith. This awareness drove Kuyper in his many-sided attempts to organize Christian scholarship and action and to develop alternative "Christian" approaches and institutions – all for the greater glory of God.

³⁶ He did not really do so until 1898 when he gave his famous Stone lectures at Princeton University, *Calvinism* (Amsterdam: Hoeveker and Wormser Ltd., New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1899) later published as *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 12th ed.

³⁷Cf. "Wat moeten wij doen ..." (1867), p. 30.