

# Doctor Abraham Kuyper

By

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If an article were to be written about Dr. Abraham Kuyper in a respectable encyclopedia, the materials would have to be divided among a number of experts. Should anyone attempt to write an entire book about him that would be based on primary sources, he would need to devote several of his best years to this effort.<sup>2</sup> A single chapter in a book such as this one that would contain a systematic treatment of the whole of Kuyper's life, would only be doomed to complete failure. That is why this chapter has consciously been turned into a more restricted project.<sup>3</sup>

I begin with an article from *De Standaard*, a paper Kuyper served as editor and co-editor from 1872-1919. It is from the issue of September 30, 1891, and discusses the contrast that liberals always make between the cultured class--the elite--, and the ordinary people. Addressing his supporters, he said,

For this reason we cannot insist too strongly on the need for keeping better and closer contact with "the people." When Minister Pierson raised a toast to the country people as threatened by stupidity and laziness, he experienced an unusual honest moment. Thus came across his lips during an unguarded utterance an attitude that always

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<sup>1</sup>H. Algra, *Het Wonder van de 19e eeuw: Van Vrije Kerken en Kleine Luyden*, fourth printing revised and expanded. Franeker, The Netherlands: T. Wever, 1976. Chapter 24, pp. 304-316. Most of the footnotes in this document are from Algra, the author of this book. Those inserted by the translator are prefaced with "Trans." Sometimes there is some of both and these are preceded by "Trans.\*"

<sup>2</sup>Trans: To the best of my knowledge, the last one to do so was Jeroen Koch, who wrote *Abraham Kuyper: een biografie*. Amsterdam: Boom, 2006. This is a tome of 672 pages, to which he devoted a total of six years (p. 9).

<sup>3</sup>Trans.\*There is a wealth of literature about Kuyper. Dr. J. C. Rullmann especially has published much about him. Particularly significant is his Kuyper bibliography, a work of three volumes, in which he treats all of his books and brochures. It originally was published in *Gereformeerd Jongelingsblad (Reformed Young Men's Magazine)*. The Roman Catholic journalist, P. Kasteel, received his doctorate on basis of a dissertation on Kuyper that contains a lot of information, particularly from the correspondence between Kuyper, Lohman and Schaepman. The Kuyper Festschrift of 1937 contains a number of very readable articles mostly by people who knew Kuyper intimately. Valuable as well is a work from Dr. W. J. Aalders, a kindred spirit in the broad sense of the word, entitled *Dr. Abraham Kuyper*, 1921. Professor P. A. Diepenhorst wrote a small book about him in the series People's University Library that contains a number of valuable citations. Trans: This is by no means an exhaustive list, not even in Dutch, let alone in English and other languages.

is thinly veiled among the elite. Men like Pierson do not know the people. They know nothing but the cultured elite themselves, for these are the neighbours among whom they move about. All their sympathies go to that population. Well, yes, those other people are there and out of an insulting condescension, they will sometimes “do something” for them, but they have a low opinion of them and have not the slightest idea of their significance and value.

In contrast, for *our* leaders ignoring the ordinary people is simply tantamount to suicide.

An anti-revolutionary statesman who ignores contact with the people is like Samson who allowed Delilah to cut his hair and along with it the secret of his strength. Every word they utter that does not echo the struggle of conscience of the people, is dim and dull and lacks any effect. But whenever their words resonate that deeper tone of national life, the simple speaker is regarded as an orator who speaks well and a glow radiates from his word.

This last sentence is the central point here: *the deeper tone of national life*. That describes Kuyper’s life’s work. He wanted a *national* revival, something that was possible only through a revival and revitalization of Calvinism. The contrast, the mutual estrangement

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between the “cultured class” and the people was more than a social phenomenon; here a spiritual contrast revealed itself.

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During the centuries from the Renaissance to the Reformation, the culture was liberated from ecclesiastical domination. But during this time the emancipated culture of Humanism underwent a gradual further development, a development in a certain direction in which it not only estranged itself from the church, but also from the Bible, and so gradually took on an anti-Christian character. During the nineteenth century it removed its mask and became blatantly anti-Christian.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>In the December 1920 issue of *Stemmen des Tijds* Professor Mr. Anema wrote a moving *In Memoriam* in which he sketched the significance of Kuyper for the cultural position of the Reformed community in The Netherlands. The

It became an organized power. Not in the shape of a stiff and official organization, but in the way of forming groups or cliques that required a certain economic or social level as a condition for acceptance and participation. It is difficult to determine in how far the Free Masons Lodge served as a subterranean connection, though it is certain that it occupied a powerful position, but much more in the colony of Indonesia than in the mother country.

Officially, this cultural elite had not turned its back on the church. Nevertheless, it was conspicuous that already during the early part of the twentieth century a high percentage of unchurched were found among liberal politicians. Already then it was exceptional for someone to swear the oath upon joining the House or Chamber. But in general, the elite were members of a church, while among the most prominent families joining a church was part of the rite of passage to adulthood and appeared as necessary a ritual as being introduced into the great world of balls and theatre. Many families, like that of Ferdinand Huyck, would have an auntie in the family, who followed her beloved and precious pastor and who occupied herself with Sunday School and the knitting circle. There was nothing wrong with that. In fact, it was kind of cute and it certainly did not threaten the powerful position of the emancipated elite. But all of this meant that if Kuyper wanted to promote a national revival, he would have to wage a bitter struggle to gain power.

With all of this, we must remember that at the public universities appointments for anti-revolutionaries, interpreted in the widest sense of the word, were practically impossible, that Gratama was not allowed to teach constitutional law, while Da Costa was barred from the athenaeum in Amsterdam, for he allegedly would have a destructive influence on the youth, even as a lecturer in the Greek language. Lohman was never interviewed because he did not stand a chance. The press was in the hands of "liberals and Jews." The entire body of officialdom, the

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article is moving in spirit, because the author felt such a strong tie with Kuyper. "Once more, now through his death, but also so many times during his life and now for the last time, once again he has stirred my soul. I have found my Saviour through his word. Through his scholarship from a disoriented incompetent I became philosophically a harmonious whole. Through his political activities I became energized to leave my preoccupation with the classics and to pick up the sword of Themis. I have mourned with him and laughed, loved and hated. He has comforted, but also baited and kicked me. I have gone through moments that belong to my most precious memories, but there have also been things I would love to erase from my memory if I could. From my youth on, all of my life has been woven together with him."

distinguished Royal Commissioners, the enlightened mayors, the intolerant school inspectors, the lawyers and notaries, they were practically all liberals, moderately indifferent and considered themselves tolerant and enlightened. But their ranks were closed.

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Kuyper was familiar with the various circumstances in which his supporters lived. He got to know them in the folksy neighbourhoods of Amsterdam; “the Friends of Truth (*Vrienden der Waarheid*)” among whom was his friend Dibbetz; the fishermen of the South Sea (*Zuider Zee*); the market gardeners of Andijk, an enclave in an almost pagan culture where Rome was gaining ground; he understood them in Groningen, where class differences were increasing during the nineteenth century between liberalizing farmers on the one hand and labourers and craftsmen on the other, often mystically oriented and at times established by Schortinghuis. He participated in the intense struggles in the rural areas of the province of South Holland, in the ridings of Alphen, Ridderkerk, Dordrecht, Gouda, and Gorinchem. He knew how preachers like Van Andel and Diemer inspired the people and how Father Ploos established one Christian school after another. He knew them behind the Ijssel River on their farms, of the old metal but faithful and obedient once they were touched in their hearts. And so it was on the island of Walcheren and in the Land of Altena.

He saw keenly how in those regions where the Reformed had retained strength and numbers, they were threatened and subject to attempts to liberalize them.

And, of course, the “*kleine luyden*”<sup>5</sup> had to take the brunt of this liberalization. Kuyper loved this term and even chose it as his subject in his Chamber speech of 1917. William of Orange had experienced how these *kleine luyden* remained faithful to him. They sometimes (mis)-behaved oddly like reckless children. But they never sought to approach the opponents for friendship. That’s how it is reported in *Prinsen Apologie*.

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<sup>5</sup>Trans: Literally “small people”—see the author’s own description of this social group down below. This term is so endemic and beloved in the Kuyper movement that it will be used throughout this chapter without further translation.

And thus Kuyper recognized in these *kleine luyden* the fountain of national strength. He would open the Bible: Egypt represented wealth; Babel signified power; but the people of the Lord were a small and unimpressive nation between those super powers. And even within Israel differences emerged between the rich and strong in Jerusalem and the small and poor of Galilee. From the beginning, Christ chose the insignificant and poor of Galilee as his field of labour and pronounced his “woe unto you” over Jerusalem.

And then Kuyper calls on the Apostle Paul as witness:

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. <sup>28</sup> God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no one may boast before him. <sup>30</sup> It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. <sup>31</sup> (I Corinthians 1:26-31).

The “*kleine luyden*” of Kuyper were not the poor and needy, but the famers, the gardeners, our industrious trades people, the shippers, fishermen,

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carpenters—in short, the whole of the labouring class and, not the least, the farmers and the small business class.

They did not especially include the poor, for they are not supposed to exist. Their existence is the result of a distortion of the diaconate when it has permanent clients. The diaconate has as its main task to restore its clients to independence. Permanent beggars are a horror that has been accepted all too easily as a condition for the preservation of the special national virtue of charity.

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And why are these *kleine luyden* the fountain of national strength? The reason is that, especially among them, faithfulness to the confession remains alive and well. Scholarship has become hostile to this confession, while the powerful of the world have become estranged from it, but among the *kleine luyden* the witness to the “glory and strength of Zion”<sup>6</sup> remains in full force. It is a question of a subterranean mentality that sometimes would get bogged down, but would constantly re-emerge from between the shrubs.

It was to these groups that Kuyper relentlessly directed his appeal to the end. When through the efforts of the “Friends of Truth” he received a call to leave the Utrecht church and move to Amsterdam, he became to a great extent the pastor of the ordinary people.<sup>7</sup> The listeners in his very crowded services came from all nooks and crannies of Amsterdam, but mostly from the city’s north east and the least from the central canal district.

He had strong support among the fishermen of Marken island, who never failed to attend the annual meetings of the Free University. When Pastor Houting arrived there straight from his graduation, he soon noticed that those fishermen would take Kuyper’s four-volume *E Voto Dordracene*, his Dutch-language commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, aboard with them to sea so they would be able to compare and check the following Sunday’s Catechism sermon!

Some years later, a local Young Men’s Association wanted to arrange a small exposition of Kuyper’s books in their meeting hall. They searched the entire congregation for his books for this purpose. A bread peddler turned out to have the greatest number of them, even more than the local pastor!

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<sup>6</sup>Trans.\* The original of this phrase is “*Zion’s roem en sterkte*,” the title of a two-volume commentary on the Belgic Confession, an early Reformed statement of the faith still upheld by the Reformed tradition in The Netherlands. The commentary was written by Dr. Arnoldus Rotterdam, a clergyman. This commentary received a second printing in 1890 and became popular especially because of its recommendation from the Union of Young Men’s Associations (YMAS) based on Reformed Principles (*Bond van Jongelings Verenigingen op Gereformeerde Grondslag*) for the study of the Confession by the YMAS. Kuyper wrote the foreword to the reprint of 1880 in these words, “This commentary is in the fullest sense of the word a work of the congregation, arranged so that even the simplest member can profit from it, while even the most advanced can page through it with joy and positive fruit. That was the aim of the writer. He caused the contents of this publication to emerge from the interested believers in a rural congregation. He was a pastor in Zuilen in the province of Utrecht, where in the middle of the previous century he explained and dissected the thirty-seven articles of this Confession exhaustively in the midst of farmers and their wives. Thus this commentary literally emerged *out* of the congregation *for* the congregation. It is this practical origin that is responsible for its popularity.

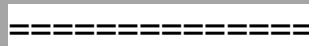
<sup>7</sup>Trans: “*Jan met de pet*”—i.e. “John with the cap,” representing the commoners.

The influence Kuyper exercised was great, due to his journalistic work in his papers, *Standaard* and *Heraut (Herald)*. He addressed the people directly and always used a language free from platitudes and clichés, a language characterized by an inspiring rhetoric. The *Herald* contains many meditations that aim directly at the ordinary faithful, the doubting soul, the disturbed heart, and

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the pious mind.<sup>8</sup>

Much has been written about the influence of Pietje Baltus in Kuyper's first congregation in Beesd. It is difficult to verify her significance for Kuyper. But it must definitely be found in the direction of the personal: She was concerned that Kuyper knew that there had to be a personal aspect to the faith and that this was possible only through free grace.<sup>9</sup>



But there is more to be said in this respect. Kuyper was a dogmatian with a strict system. He was after all a student of Professor Scholten, who enjoyed a reputation as an "apostle of reason." Thus Kuyper never completely distanced himself from philosophical speculation. As a systematic dogmatian he sometimes sought to ally himself more with the Reformed fathers of the Dordt Synod and their successors than with Calvin himself.

At the same time, there was a connection with the Further Dutch Reformation ("*nadere reformatie*"--1600-1750<sup>10</sup>), that included a holy inner

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<sup>8</sup>Trans: This paragraph would leave the impression of simple and direct language. I refer you to my Introduction in my translation of Kuyper meditations under the title *The Ascent of the Son—The Descent of the Spirit*, where I have a section on Kuyper's writing style. It is not quite the simple style Algra suggests. In fact, I suspect that Kuyper's *kleine luyden* had to wrestle with his language, whether written or oral. The language he used in this very speech that I am translating here even challenged my Dutch consultant.

<sup>9</sup>Trans: For further information about this experience see Frank Vanden Berg, *Abraham Kuyper: A Biography*. St. Catharines ON, 1978, pp. 33-34. For a more recent scholarly, more detailed and secular Dutch treatment of the same experience, go to Jeroen Koch, *Abraham Kuyper: een biography*. Amsterdam: Boom, 2006, ch. 1.

<sup>10</sup>Trans: "*Nadere Reformatie*" is a Dutch term that refers to a period of church history in the [Netherlands](#), following the [Reformation](#), from roughly 1600 until 1750. The term is most often translated into English as either "**Dutch Second Reformation**" or "**Further Reformation**," with the latter translation being preferred. In broad terms, the period and its representatives are known for their desire to apply the principles of the Reformation to their day – their homes, churches, and, indeed, all sectors of Dutch society in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. In their balance and value of both orthodoxy as well as piety, the *Nadere Reformatie* resembles English [Puritanism](#),

emotional life, of “being near to God.”<sup>11</sup> His meditations are replete with references to this kind of spirituality. The fact that in our time this literature is hardly known is not, I fear, because it is linguistically outdated, but, rather, that Reformed spiritual life has weakened and shrunk. There is in those meditations a wonderful depth.

One Good Friday, I (the author) attended a church service in a village church, where people gathered for worship after a busy work day. It was in the middle of spring; there was a tense busyness on many market farms. The people came to church that evening from that busy day that was so unlike a Sunday. The preacher’s text was from Psalm 22:15—“ You lay me in the dust of death.” It was a moving sermon. Later I discussed the sermon with the preacher and he told me how difficult the preparation had been for him. He had searched hard for a text and a theme suitable for Good Friday that was to be observed meaningfully in the context of a spring day that exploded every which way and demanded hard labour from his parishioners. And then, he said, “I read Kuyper’s meditations from his book, *His Departure from Jerusalem*<sup>12</sup> and there I found the riches I needed for this sermon. Actually, my sermon was little more than a simple read through this meditation to my congregation. Go and read it once....”

Kuyper had a goal in mind for his people. It was not to gain a position of power for himself. He did not regard it as a kind of invasive storm mobilized by him. He wanted to find new ways with and for the people and break open new possibilities. He believed that this would benefit the entire population. To understand this, one has to read through some of his Deputation orations, those speeches in which he summoned people to the struggle. All of that was definitely for the future of the entire nation. Then it grips him that miracles have taken place in our country. After Groen Van Prinsterer passed away, changes came that he could not have dreamed of.

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and German [Pietism](#). In fact, Puritanism had much influence on the *Nadere Reformatie*. Many Puritan works were translated into Dutch during this time. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nadere\\_Reformatie](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nadere_Reformatie). Accessed on March 6, 2017.

<sup>11</sup>Trans: This was a term popularized by Kuyper’s 2-volume meditational book *Nabij God te zijn*.

<sup>12</sup>Trans: This would be my translation of this book title *Zijn uitgang te Jeruzalem*, a title derived from Luke 9:31.



With the growth of our power, our responsibility also increased. Liberalism has had its time. There is a mighty upheaval-- not to speak of revolution—afoot and we are not here merely to keep things from going too far.

We have a very different task. Let it be said here with emphasis and with all the glow of inner conviction that whoever believes in the Christ and expects Him from the heavens, may neither just sit still twiddling his thumb nor restrict himself merely to strengthening the dykes. In the Name of Christ he is obligated, come what may, to stand courageously in the breach of his people and to prepare for a *Christian-democratic development of our nation*. That is why both religion and freedom of conscience must be restored to honour, while our people must once again be placed in their organic relationship and a spirit of compassion again be poured out over our entire political system.

For Kuyper it's all about a wide and deep –going reformation of our *national life*. It is touching when we read how he drew the great ideal in his Maranatha speech of 1891, but how little any of this came to fruition in those people who could be considered his followers.

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This is a good place to bring up the topic of the *antithesis*, but the question is whether this will serve any purpose. What Kuyper meant by this and how he saw it applied in the political struggle has been misunderstood and falsified so often, that we may well speak here of intentional incomprehension in the interest of vested choices. Be that as it may, for those who know or wish to know, it can be of interest to read Kuyper's own words as he wrote them in preparing to deliver his speech to the Deputants. It is all about a contradiction that was clearly brought to light since the French Revolution and that led Groen van Prinsterer to his general political slogan "*The Evangel against the Revolution*:"<sup>13</sup>

At that time a battle, a principal battle, a life struggle broke out about whether the direction of our political system was to be deduced from human will or from God's.

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<sup>13</sup>Trans: "*Tegen de Revolutie het Evangelie*."

Then all those who let go of Christ and His cross: Our compass is from human will; while all those who called on Christ, as God revealed in the flesh, kneeled down and declared we retain God's revealed will as our only direction. That is how the contrast of Revolution vs Evangel arose and *that* is the Antithesis that keeps dividing the worldview of the citizenry throughout the nineteenth century up till today. No one spun it; no one invented it. That antithesis is there; it exists and it governs our entire life. The thing is, at times it wraps itself intentionally in such a heavy fog that most people don't see it until the sun breaks through again. At that point, everyone again sees that this rock of offence is still there, right in our face, and still

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is part of our journey. That is precisely the reason Liberals deny the existence of the antithesis, because they are aware how a clear consciousness of it on the part of the mass of people will always turn the latter against them. That is the source of their bitterness against Groen van Prinsterer, or their bitterness against the Calvinists and their bitterness in 1905, because at that time the eyes of the people were wide open to the reality of the antithesis. Liberals accused us of sowing division.

In the same context, Kuyper pointed out that recognizing the antithesis merely as a struggle within our hearts, is against Scripture.

That we are herewith not in the least talking merely about a struggle in the *heart*, but in actual *life* as well becomes irrefutable from what Jesus said about family life: "For henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three; <sup>53</sup> they will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against her mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law" (Luke 12:52-53). People will be enemies to their own family members. They will hate each other and hand them over. These are words of

such burning gravity that no human being would dare make such utterance. Only Christ might and could say it, because He was God.<sup>14</sup>

Elsewhere, Kuyper points out that we must properly imprint this in ourselves that the issue here is a choice between principles and not a judgement about the condition of specific individuals. He even expresses his appreciation for certain elements in the political arena of his principal opponents, such as the historical awareness among conservatives,<sup>15</sup> the instinct for liberty among Liberals, the demand for justice of the radicals and the social compassion among socialists.

But let us not have any illusions. We cannot count on an honest treatment on the subject of *Kuyper and the antithesis* on the part of many who are still so eager to distance themselves from him in order to strengthen their own position.

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There is a curious part in Kuyper's reflections on the antithesis, namely his theory that Liberals deny the existence of the antithesis for purposes of protecting themselves, for once the people realize what is at stake, they will turn against Liberalism, for the people do not want to lose the influence of their faith. Once they understand that certain political moves inevitably end up with a public life in which the lights of heaven are snuffed out, they will resist, for the people in their deepest conviction still comprise a Christian nation.

In this view, Kuyper's unusual use of the word "*atavism*" also plays a role. Currently, the word has fallen into disfavour, but he used it in its scientific, biological

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sense. The word derives from the Latin "*atavus*," which means "forefather." In inheritology the term refers to the phenomenon that certain attributes characteristic of a distant ancestor suddenly re-appear in a descendant. So Kuyper thought to ascertain sometimes that something awoke in a

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<sup>14</sup>This citation is from a speech Kuyper delivered in 1901 under the title "We Calvinists."

<sup>15</sup>Trans: English readers may well be surprised that conservatives here appear as opponents to Kuyper, for in their world Christians and their politics are usually associated with conservatism. Not so in Kuyper's world.

wonderful manner among our people that had been dormant since the Golden Age.

When he took on the position of chief editor of the recently established *Standaard*, Kuyper was wholly absorbed in the *Geuzen*<sup>16</sup> atmosphere. The *Geuzen* were the centre piece in the first main article of the initial issue that constituted a call to the few who still carried the holy heritage of history, namely the freedom of conscience, in their hearts. Oh, may they not grow faint-hearted, though they are few in number and miniscule in strength. “Small was also the fleet of the *Geuzen*!”

Sometimes he seemed to pin his hopes on the wonder of that “atavism.” At other times and, indeed, more frequently, his eyes were fixed on something else. The people that are susceptible to his call, the people that understand a Reformed national appeal, it’s already there, it already exists and it is much more numerous than the ruling elitist class thinks, but it needs to be woken up and once again gird itself. They must be addressed in the language they understand. Their *instinctive life* still reacts in its traditional way. The language it understands, that, as far as Kuyper was concerned, in a certain sense is the language of the forefathers. That was not the language of Brother Benjamin,<sup>17</sup> as Wolff and Deken reproduced it mockingly, but the tongue that echoed the language of the Bible.

When Kuyper recognizes that large crowd of supporters, the thought constantly surfaces that they belong to those *kleine luyden*. In his mind, their waking up to Christian activity, that stirring them up to Reformed nationalism, also implies a battle for social justice and human rights. That was by no means a minor issue for him.

I do not know of a speech of his mightier than that of 1891 entitled “*Maranatha*,”<sup>18</sup> delivered after the fearful winter of 1890 that brought about so much suffering.

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<sup>16</sup>Trans. *Geuzen*, (Dutch), French **Gueux**, the largely Calvinist Dutch **guerrilla** and privateering force whose military actions initiated **the Netherlands'** revolt against Spanish rule (1568–1609).

<sup>17</sup>Trans. Possibly a comic strip?

<sup>18</sup>Trans. An Aramaic-Greek word meaning "our Lord comes," or is "coming." The Bible closes with a prayer form of the word, “Come, Lord Jesus.” For an English translation of the speech, see James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, pp. 205-230.

For thousands upon thousands, life remains a matter of unceasing drudgery for bread, just for bread, to eat in the sweat of their brows. Sickness and disease threaten all of us without ceasing. Age breaks manly strength. Death continues its march, creating widows and orphans. A severe winter such as we have just experienced is cause for endless misery.

And then he teaches his hearers that a new time is coming that is characterized by *thirst for a social life*. And, “*If there is anything that is social, it is the Christian religion.*”

But there is more. The powerful nineteenth-century humanistic culture has great suction power against which Christians must guard themselves. In a moving article by Professor Anema in *Stemmen des Tijds*<sup>19</sup> after Kuyper’s death, Anema points to another

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danger that Kuyper also recognized, namely “sectarian slumber.” Kuyper himself was a man of the world from head to toe in the good sense of the word. He was brilliant even in areas of scholarship he had not studied; he was a dramatic and linguistic artist and a fervent admirer of all things technical as well as aesthetic.

Kuyper saw it as his calling, in the words of Professor Anema, to help them develop the insight that from God’s perspective they also had a right to the fruits of culture, that, in fact, they should not avoid them and that they had a divine calling for this area, without doing any damage to the precious spiritual life of the simple Christians. That has been his major task to which he devoted several decades without letup and that reached its high point in the founding of the VU or the Free Reformed University.<sup>20</sup>

There had been a VU in Brussels already for years. It was established by prominent Belgians, especially from among the Free Masons. Very wealthy Belgians established and supported it, while it was expanded after World War I with the aid of American capital. It functioned as a training ground for liberal and radical politics in Belgium. In a certain sense, one could also

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<sup>19</sup>Trans. The title of this magazine might be translated as “*Voices of Our Time.*”

<sup>20</sup>Trans. Popularly referred to as “VU.” Throughout the rest of this chapter I will refer to it as such. The English translation used by the VU itself is “Free Reformed University.” I received my doctorate from the VU in 1979.

consider the Roman Catholic University in Leuven a VU, since it is not a state university.

Kuyper started his plea for a Christian university already during the first year of *De Standaard* newspaper. The law on higher education of 1876 acknowledged the right to establish special universities and other tertiary institutions. There no longer being any legal obstacle, in 1878 the Association for Higher Education on a Reformed Foundation<sup>21</sup> was established, which in 1880 moved on to the founding and opening of the VU in Amsterdam. It was an event purely within the old Netherlands Reformed Church. Members of the Seceded Church had no part in it. Hoedemaker was one of the most enthusiastic supporters.<sup>22</sup>

It originally had three faculties: theology, language and literary arts, and law. They started with five professors: Drs. A. Kuyper, F. L. Rutgers, J. Hoedemaker, D. P. D. Fabius and F. W. J. Dilloo. A total of five students enrolled in 1880.<sup>23</sup>

The university received temporary shelter in rooms of the Scottish Mission Church. At night, graffiti words from Dante's *Inferno* would be written on the doors: "Abandon every hope, all you who enter." Most Impressive was the opening of the VU in the quire (choir) of the *Nieuwe Kerk*,<sup>24</sup> where Elout van Soeterberg offered 100,000 guilders as funding capital. Kuyper delivered his inaugural address about "sphere sovereignty" with which he held his audience spell bound for two hours.<sup>25</sup> Both philosophers and

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<sup>21</sup>Trans: Vereniging voor Hoger Onderwijs op Gereformeerde Grondslag."

<sup>22</sup>In his publication *Het Antirevolutionair Beginsel en het Hoger Onderwijs (The Anti-Revolutionary Principle and Higher Education)*, among others, Hoedemaker defended the following propositions:

The same motives that have led to the founding of our Christian schools, compel us on with irresistible force to the creation of a Christian university.

The right to establish the VU must not be considered a mere side product from the dangers and consequences of the public education offered at the state universities, but must be directly derived from our principles.

Lohman put it this way: "Free higher education is thus a natural development of the principles that constitute the foundation of free lower education."

<sup>23</sup>Trans: Theunis Doekes Prins, my wife's great uncle, was among those five students. During his first years, he lived in the Kuyper home. Alie van der Wel-Prins, *Een dienend leven*. See also J Boer and F. Boer-Prins, *Every Square Inch—A Missionary Memoir*, vol. 1, p. 73. [www.SocialTheology/Boeriana.com](http://www.SocialTheology/Boeriana.com).

<sup>24</sup>Trans: The **Nieuwe Kerk** is a 15th-century church in **Amsterdam**, located on Dam Square, next to the Royal Palace.

<sup>25</sup>Trans: The original Dutch of this phrase is "*Souvereiniteit in eigen kring*," which is also the title of the oration. For an English translation of the entire speech, see James D. Bratt, pp. 461-490. The English term has become common currency, a shibboleth, among the international Reformational community till the day of this translation.

political scientists would later make appeals to this oration and try to further develop its principles. The people who came to participate in the opening ceremony

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were for the most part ordinary people and farmers, but there were also many clergymen and representatives of the Christian education movement.

Twelve farmers from Anjum, Friesland, each pledged a minimum of 25 guilders per year, while one of them made 1,000 guilders available. The main organizer in the province of Friesland was the trader in lumber, Walle Melis Oppedijk from Ylst. Among the orthodox moderate group that had its followers also in Friesland, Oppedijk lost respect, while in the election for the Second Chamber his followers in the district of Sneek seemed to have shrunk in numbers. It was openly written in *De Banier (The Banner)* that this was because the man was too closely allied to Kuyper. There was a hardening distaste among this broad group of moderates against Kuyper and his supporters. The hostility against the VU did not come only from the Liberals. However, the point here is not the history of the University so much as to show how Kuyper, who can be regarded as the founder in the full sense of the word, had inspired these *kleine luyden* to do what initially would be far from their mental horizon, namely to establish and to maintain a university.<sup>26</sup>

And remember: from 1880 till 1947 this university received no government subsidy. The exception since 1905 was an annual grant of 4,000 guilders as compensation, consisting of lecture halls provided by the public university that were lit and heated free of charge for purposes of special academic chairs. Prior to World War II, it appeared impossible that the VU would really desire government subsidy; not only the left, but also the Christian Historical Union opposed it for principal reasons.

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<sup>26</sup>The liberal professor from Leiden, Dr. H. E. J. Holwerda, who urged liberals to change, declared that he was proud to be a Dutchman, when he saw this broad swath of lower class people who demonstrated that they were prepared to sacrifice for higher education. Allard Pierson assured Kuyper that this support for the University by the lower classes of society gave encouragement for the future of our people and the fatherland.

Kuyper himself said in his inaugural lecture, "Here then is a group who less than thirty years ago were ridiculed as "night schoolers," but who now exhaust their strength for a scholarly purpose. These are the least respected from the non-intellectual part of the nation, who come from plough and trough to gather pennies for a university yet to be established. In the money entrusted to us there hides something higher than their measurable value in metal. Prayer clings to this gold and love and the sweat of the brow.

Th. Heemskerk wrote in 1931 that there would need to be a profound change in the spirituality of the important and influential groups among the Dutch people, should the notion of subsidy arise at all. This profound change has arrived. This becomes more clear when you remember the struggle of 1905. The degrees granted by the University were not yet recognized. Kuyper, in his capacity as member of the Cabinet, had served a proposal to effect a change so that a diploma of the VU would have the same official recognition as that of public universities.

The debates about Kuyper's proposal are unusually enlightening. They are shameful for liberalism and socialism. Both of these declared with great unanimity and sharpness that this would never happen! Never! Why not? Because, since the University is bound to Reformed principles, scholarly or scientific education is impossible. The fierce socialist Troelstra and the distinguished liberal Professor Van der Vlugt from Leiden stood shoulder to shoulder.<sup>27</sup> The Mayor of Amsterdam, Mr. Van Leeuwen, later vice-president

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of the Council of State,<sup>28</sup> expressed his condemnation over the possibility that the University could grant degrees to whomever it might choose. There would be no defense if it were decided to appoint three people from the gutter to the curatorium.

Mr. Marchant later observed to the contrary that the official scholarship at state universities was spoiled and pampered by its monopoly—and pampered people easily go astray.

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<sup>27</sup>Trans: Not much has changed since then. Recently (2016), a Harvard student reported that one of her professors stated publicly without hesitation that "Of course, Christians cannot be professors!"

<sup>28</sup>Trans: The [Raad van State](#) or Council of State is a [constitutionally](#) established advisory body to the [Dutch Government](#) and [States General](#) that consists of members of the royal family and Crown-appointed members generally having political, commercial, diplomatic or military experience. The Council of State must be consulted by the cabinet on proposed legislation before a [law](#) is submitted to parliament. The Council of State Administrative Law division also serves as one of the four highest courts of appeal in administrative matters. The [King](#) is president of the Council of State but he seldom chairs meetings. The Vice-President of the Council of State chairs meetings in the King's absence. Under Dutch constitutional law, the Vice-President of the Council is acting head of state when there is no monarch such as if the royal family were to become extinct. It was founded in 1531 (Wikipedia—accessed March 10, 2017). Thus, this was one of the very highest positions in the Dutch government.



The VU is also of great significance for Reformed life in both South Africa and the United States. The University of Potchefstroom is a daughter of the VU as it is described in the chapter about the Doppers.<sup>29</sup>

For Kuyper the battle for the VU was the high point of the school struggle. He gave himself to the entire school struggle, in which a major emphasis of his was that the school belongs to the parents. Let them carry the responsibility and they will do it. These simple people will demonstrate that the education of their children does not need to be farmed out to the government, but that they themselves will guard the quality and, indeed, the well being of the entire enterprise.

*Kleine luyden* and large issues, simple commoners and the national future, those are the themes of his life. There is a strong parallel in his thinking between church and society. In the church the emphasis is on the independence and maturity of the local congregation; in social life, the initiative of the people.

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This is the end of my chapter on Kuyper. I realize it is very one-sided. Had this book been written by a theologian, much should have been made of the fact that as theologian he was typical of the nineteenth century. But just for this once, it does not hurt that a member of the outgoing generation, who has seen and heard Kuyper; who grew up in a family of Seceders, but where Kuyper was highly respected; who from his youth read daily materials written by and about Kuyper—just once more in connection with this book, regards Kuyper as a gift of God to the Reformed people in The Netherlands during the years of its emancipation.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Trans. Doppers refers to a very conservative wing of Afrikaner churches. The “chapter” refers to Chapter 16 in Algra’s book in which this entire article constitutes Chapter 24.

<sup>30</sup>Trans: --and, as it turns out, also a gift of God to a much wider global community during the 21<sup>st</sup> century and, hopefully, beyond, but now in the English and several other languages and all continents. As John Vriend, a professional translator of Reformational literature once put it prophetically: “The 21<sup>st</sup> century will be Kuyper’s century.” The article you have just read is from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but has, in the context of a considerable library of Kuyperiana, much significance for this present century. You have not just read history, but also the present and the future!

