

The Kuyper Centennial

By Kathleen Ferrier¹

Editorial comment: Kathleen Ferrier gives us a peek behind the curtain of the Kuyper Centennial at the VU. By putting on Kuyper's glasses, important events during the last half year are seen in another light.

When I was asked to be the chair for the team that would give form and content to the Kuyper Centennial at the Free University (VU), I felt honoured. I found it interesting, for how could we draw the most effective attention of our students, Dutch society, but also abroad, that the founder of the VU, Abraham Kuyper, deserved?

I was honoured and found it interesting for more reasons. Shortly before I was invited, I had returned to the Netherlands from a five-year period of living and working in Hong Kong, that included travel in China and the region in general. It was a great surprise to me to discover that Kuyper was of considerable interest to many locals. That holds especially for his ideas about the relation of church and state. I had many interesting discussions with Kuyper experts!

I also found it interesting because Kuyper is an amazingly versatile, multifaceted and colourful person, in whom we still continue to find new aspects. It is already quite noticeable when a person is capable of establishing a university, or a political party, or to start a newspaper, or even call a church into life—but he did all of these and more. John Snel write about this in his book *De zeven levens van Abraham Kuyper: Portret van een ongrijpbaar staatsman*.²

Opening by the Queen

Thus I found it an honour and a challenge to give this man the podium he deserves and we began as a team full of enthusiasm.

At first, few had any idea of the special context wherein we would give form and content to this centennial. I refer, of course, to the circumstances that arose from

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² See Snel's article in this series.

Covid-19. Everyone, students or lecturers, was forced to sit at home. At the beginning of the academic year we had in view lecture halls full of students who would be addressed among others by the Queen herself. It was indeed a nice event, an unforgettable hybrid gathering, but different from what we had envisioned. Like everyone else, we were all constantly busy adjusting to the reality dictated by covid and at the same time to create the desired impact of what we *did* envision: international conferences, many local gatherings throughout the country, etc. It was a case of adjustment and flexibility; row with the available oars at hand.

But it was not only covid circumstances that changed the centennial from what we had foreseen. It was also the rise of the Black-Lives-Matter movement, that broad global social movement, as well as the rise of conspiracy theories like QAnon et cetera. I would even dare claim that these events offered an interesting framework in the which to view the person of Kuyper through a new and actual pair of glasses.

No Ideal Person

Of course, Kuyper was a controversial figure. That does not hold of most people. The fact that I was honoured by being invited to be the chair of this team did not imply that we were out to present an almost “ideal man.” To the contrary; we wanted to create a realistic image, including all the negative aspects that would belong to him. Such critique comes along with interesting aspects.

I have to think about that in the context of Black Lives Matter. Statues of national heroes like Jan Pieterzoon Coen and Michiel de Ruyter were defaced and threatened to be destroyed. There arose a sharp discussion about whether the statues of such people, who are associated by many with exploitation and pain, should not disappear from public spaces.

I personally am not proponent of such an approach. I approve that the pain these people have caused and the great injustice that took place with their participation be named, talked about and examine them clearly, but definitely not to hide it. We need to determine what happened and how it affects us even today. We need to

stand still to consider what this requires of us. Now! And then to counter them with other heroes.³

Rejectable

Something like that holds for Kuyper as well. He also had opinions that, with today's knowledge and context, we would strongly reject. Those also need to be named. For example, he strongly opposed female suffrage and at the beginning of the nineteenth century he forced laws with which he wanted to end the railway strike in 1903, completely bypassing the arguments of workers, that were the reason for the strikes to begin with. He also freely expressed his racist feelings. He wrote that African culture was more of a pool of mud than a part of the bustling dynamics that pushed history forward; this continent had a "lower form of life. However, those opinions may not be the reason to refuse to give Kuyper a visible public place that he deserves as the founder of the VU. What is to be rejected is to be named and debated with students and the society as a whole. Pronouncements from those earlier days much be understood historically as well as in our current reality.

Refreshing

Kuyper actually has much to say today. This democrat⁴ in heart and soul was refreshing in the open and uninhibited manner in which he promoted his standpoints. I find this one of the most interesting aspects of this man. He did not allow himself to be led by all sort of statistics that did not exist at the time, but if they had, he would have ignored them. He did not follow the popular opinion of the electorate but presented a vision to which he bound the electorate. We can learn some important lessons from that, even current politicians. He would consistently carry out a standpoint that was based on his own principles and ideals, among which sphere sovereignty was a leading principle. When as world citizens we are confronted with our current events, I observe that that principle of sphere sovereignty receives a new dynamic as antidote to populism.

³ A proposal from the translator: How about having statues memorializing both positive and negative aspects of a given hero's life, standing next to or opposite each other? That would reflect reality objectively.

⁴ We must be remember that he was a *Dutch* democrat and should not associate him with the looseness of democrats in North America. North American democrats are at heart liberals of various stripes, something that cannot be said of Kuyper.

Lack of Recognition

The youthful demonstrators who forced their way into the Capitol in Washington DC and the vandals who created such destruction in various Dutch cities as so-called reaction to a curfew, all have different motives for their actions. But I am of the opinion that both groups, directly or indirectly, base themselves on the same ground for their objectionable behavior—the feeling of not being heard or seen. Their daily problems, they feel, are not acknowledged by the elite who live in far-away The Hague or Washington and make decisions that affect their lives.

In our current society fault lines grow deeper and deeper while groups of people are increasingly distant from each other, because they have the feeling they have lost control over their own lives. The principle of sphere sovereignty needs to be restored to honour. It is often associated in popular opinion with the pillarization, whereby every sphere or pillar has its own internal authority on basis of their “own ordinances.” But it is more than that. It also means restricting the power of the state in the various spheres. That might affect special education that does not fall under the direct responsibility of the state. In that way, room can be created for other organizations and spheres that have their own internal responsibilities.

Trust

All this is possible only if trust in the citizen is returned. Here politics has a role to play, but so do scholarship, religious leadership and the media.

By naming the negative with respect to the person of Kuyper, we will recognize the power of his authority even more sharply. This certainly holds for the challenges that face politics, scholarship and the media: accepting the power of a multicultural society. Sphere sovereignty can give that society a new form that leaves room for differences and for respect for minorities.

We are obligated to celebrate this centennial not only to Kuyper, but also to the student population and the entire community that today comprises the university today that has existed since 140 years ago. That community today comprises a large number of cultures, nationalities and religions, a multicultural society in practice, all brought together by scholarship and a longing for knowledge.

