

Deep Water from the Kuyperian Well: The Future of Higher Education

by Lambert Zuidervaart

A Transforming Vision

Reformed institutions of higher education in North America have inherited a grand vision of the church and the world. Stemming from John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, and Kuyper's successors, this vision emphasizes the transformation of society and culture. According to the Kuyperian vision, Jesus completely transforms human life and calls for committed partners in this transforming work. Not one institution in society, not one area of culture, not one square inch in the entire universe lies beyond the scope of Jesus' ministry.

This vision makes the details of life very important. If nothing lies outside Jesus' transforming work, then all our decisions and actions are significant, and conflicts about education or politics or medical ethics cannot be avoided. Such conflicts occur in two directions. The first conflict is with dominant forces in the world today. Though Christians are in the world for the sake of the world, they cannot simply be "of the world." We must resist forces that destroy the world God loves. The second conflict is with fellow believers. If we are partners in Jesus' transforming work, then there

is little room for simply "doing one's own thing" and little room for simply letting the other side have its way. We are obliged to work together, even when we disagree about how to do this.

By emphasizing the details of life, a transforming vision often intensifies conflicts among Christians. How much easier it would be to think that God only saves individual souls, to nurture one's own soul, and to win other souls for Christ. There would be fewer causes for concern and much less about which to fight. Then we would not have to concern ourselves with poverty and racism and sexism, debate the pros and

cons of Christian schooling, and ask whether our parenting or consuming pleases God and serves our neighbor.

But what does this have to do with the future of higher education in the Reformed tradition? In a sense, everything! Unless each generation embraces anew a transforming vision, our colleges will lose sight of their mission and their very reason for existence will gradually disappear.

Let me be more specific. After a lifetime in schools affiliated with the Kuyperian strand within Reformed Christianity—not only as a student in grade school, high school, college, and graduate school but also as a faculty member at two Christian high schools and at two Reformed colleges—I have strong senses of both promise and peril for the entire enterprise of higher education in the Reformed tradition.

Promise

The sense of promise comes from the fact that Reformed institutions have much to offer their own students, their supporters, and the larger world of higher education, and that there is a felt need for what we can offer. Let me mention three opportunities.

First, higher education is unsettled right now. Many institutions are looking for new models of curriculum, pedagogy, and scholarship, models that get beyond narrow specializations and isolated expertise. Consequently, this is a good time for our own institutions to reexamine their missions and strategies, and to share our findings and experiments with others. We *could* discover that some things we have done well in the past, such as placing academic work in larger social, cultural, and religious contexts, would prove even more valuable in the future.

Second, significant segments of the American population no longer embrace the myths of economic progress and geopolitical domination that sustained much of higher education after World War II. The dark side of capitalism and the failures of the nation state have begun to emerge, now that the irresistible push to commodify everything has become obvious and national fears cannot be projected onto what Ronald Reagan called "the evil empire." Although such fears can easily be redirected toward gays and welfare recipients at home or toward Japan and Iraq abroad, this demythologizing has allowed alternative visions of life to flourish. Many of these alternative visions recognize the limits to human



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achievement and the interconnectedness of all creatures. A new thirst for spirituality has emerged, to which Reformed institutions can respond.

Third, leading Christian and Jewish intellectuals in North America now acknowledge that traditions whose substance has shriveled will not survive in the twenty-first century. I think here of studies by Mark Noll and George Marsden, which sound sobering notes about the weakness of intellectual pursuits among conservative Christians and the loss of faith traditions among liberal Christians. But I also refer to work by African-American voices of social conscience such as Peter Gomes and Cornell West and to the provocative politics of meaning being forged by Michael Lerner and *Tikkun* magazine. This is not a time of complacency for leading members of the religious intelligentsia, and it should not be for our own institutions either.

Peril

Near every open door, I see forces that threaten to close it and to lock our own institutions into spaces where we are sure to lose our creativity, relevance, and substance.

First, much of the search for new educational models is driven by economic and technological imperatives that threaten the very identity of colleges and universities as independent centers for research, critique, and cultural creation. Feeling the crunch of decreased government funding, shifting job markets, and economic globalization, many institutions turn to the latest fund raising strategies, informa-

tion technologies, and marketing plans without thoroughly examining their appropriateness for higher education. I speak in sound bites here, but I'm sure all of you know what I am talking about: wealthy donors playing an inordinate role in setting college policy; full-time tenured faculty positions being replaced by part-timers; recruiters selling college education simply as a path to a career or to personal gratification. Many of our students enter college with careerist and nar-

cissistic views of the value of higher education. So it is not hard for colleges and universities to get caught up in a cycle where short term fixes spell long term disaster. If, in the end, all that we can offer society is job training and intellectual entertainment, we will be replaced by other institutions that are much more efficient and effective at providing these services. Small religiously based colleges will be the first to go.

Second, the new thirst for spirituality does not seem much in evidence within the academy as such. Nor, for that matter, do many churches of North America seem ready to offer living waters. Instead, both the

academy and the church are caught up in a culture war that puts a premium on party lines and diminishes dialogue even among members of the same university or church communion. I do not wish to belittle the issues at stake in these skirmishes: abortion, civil rights, ecology, the entertainment industry, and identity politics all deserve serious public debate. Unfortunately, neither the academy nor the church has provided adequate forums in which genuine dialogue can take place, relatively free from the pressures of power and money.



Rembrandt, *Jesus und die Samariterin*

And, it seems to me, Reformed denominations, such as the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and the Reformed Church in America (RCA), and their affiliated educational institutions, are as much at fault here as anyone else. To persons thirsting for a vision to replace materialism and nationalism, the church and the academy do not seem so much like oases as sand in the desert storm.

Third, the historians and prophets who seek substance often find ordinary religionists enamored with consumerist gimmicks. As the religious intelligentsia call for a renewing return to our sources, ordinary Christians happily march on to the latest hit tunes. Among institutions in the Kuyperian wing of the Reformed tradition, this march has taken a consumer-populist twist. While the official theology remains Calvinist, the lived theology—the type of personal piety, music and liturgy, cultural and political affiliations, media of communication, support for parachurch organizations, etc.—resembles a bland brew of feel-good religion mixed with reactionary social stances. A clear indication of where the CRC comfort zone lies occurred when its Synod endorsed affiliation with the National Evangelical Association and rejected membership in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Around the same time Calvin College revised its policy on church membership to allow faculty members to belong to an assortment of small evangelical or fundamentalist Presbyterian churches, who now want little to do with the CRC, but did not permit membership in the mainline Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), despite strong faculty support for the latter. When the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (5.2 million members) agreed in August 1997 to enter into “full communion” with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the RCA, this notable step toward unity among churches of the historic reformation was barely noted on Calvin’s campus, even though the RCA is also one of the churches to which Calvin faculty may belong. The college, like its CRC mother church, seems sadly out of step with the larger world of Reformed Christianity, quite unlike our patron saint, who painted such a broad canvas in his Stone Lectures in 1898. My worry is that, cut off from the larger expressions of the Reformed tradition around the world, the Kuyperian tradition in North America will wither into empty phrases mouthed on ceremonial occasions but having little to do with the lives of our students and supporters.

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The Shape of Education

Let me make three suggestions for the future. My first suggestion has to do with the shape of our educational endeavors. The history of curriculum and scholarship at Reformed colleges after World War II spans three stages. Until about the mid-sixties, our colleges embraced a classical liberal arts approach, with a strong emphasis on history, literature, philosophy, and foreign languages, and the scholar teacher as campus authority. There was little pressure on a professor to publish in academic journals. His or her scholarship (mostly his, at the time) served the classroom, campus, and church. In the eyes of the larger academy, many of these scholar teachers would have looked like dilettantes. But in the eyes of their students and the church, they were respected masters of the liberal arts tradition.

In the mid-sixties, the liberal arts approach gave way to a new disciplinary model. The new model emphasized broad exposure to the entire range of humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, combined with specialized study in one discipline. Although classically trained masters still had some sway on campus, the locus of authority shifted to those professors who had won their spurs in

the larger academic world, but who could also rearticulate the liberal arts and religious tradition for college supporters and church laity. My former colleague Nicholas Wolterstorff is a good example of such a professor.

Sometime in the early 1980s another stage emerged, one much harder to characterize because it has nowhere received a definitive elaboration. Let me describe this as the stage of activist professionalism. In curriculum, this has involved adapting a liberal arts core to meet requirements of professional and pre-professional programs, as well as encouraging internships, service opportunities, and off-campus experiences. In pedagogy, this has meant relying less on lecturing about prescribed content and turning to more collaborative and dialogical approaches. In scholarship, an increasing amount of research and writing has been directed toward current issues in society and culture, and less toward either the classical or contemporary theories.

I think our colleges have nearly exhausted the potential of this third stage. Now we confront some weighty decisions about the future shape of higher education in the Reformed tradition. What I recommend is critical contextualism. By critical contextualism I mean an approach to curriculum,

pedagogy, and scholarship that uncovers the historical, social, and cultural subtexts of the professions and disciplines in order better to understand, evaluate, and transform those professions and disciplines.

Let me briefly describe what I have in mind. I think all of us can recognize both the strengths and the weaknesses of the first two stages—the classical and the disciplinary approaches. We are much less clear about the strengths and weaknesses of activist professionalism. I would suggest that this third stage gains *relevance* at the expense of *creativity* and *substance*. It encourages us to be engaged, but discourages us from taking the time to understand the larger forces at stake in contemporary issues. It does not inspire us to explore thoroughly the resources of our own tradition, much less those of other traditions.

The critique of activist professionalism is not something that individual educators can bring about on their own—our institutions and the academic profession cast long shadows over much of our work. It is really a matter for institution-wide discussion and reform. In a sense, we have to go back to square one, and ask again: Why should students study some of the classics of Western Civilization? Why do we encourage students to pursue off-campus opportunities? What is the point of contributing or not contributing to the glut of professional and academic publications on any particular topic? Where in all of this lies the challenge to help transform society and culture? It is through such serious self-examination and critique that our colleges will transform our earlier stages of development into a new model of higher education that is not simply driven by economic and technological imperatives.

The Cultural Significance of Education

My second suggestion pertains to the cultural significance of our educational efforts. I mentioned earlier a new thirst for spirituality, which the church and academy fail to address. I don't know what the climate at other campuses is like. At Calvin College, where I have taught for twelve years, a few explosive situations have punctuated long stretches of tense silence, with minor skirmishes rumbling continuously in the background. We have failed as a college community to have serious and sustained academic discussion of hot-button issues. This failure has kept us from giving significant leadership to our own church communities, and it has decreased the opportunities for a Kuyperian intellectual voice to be heard in North America. Needless to say, an atmo-

sphere of tense silence is hardly conducive to the development of a new and winsome Reformed spirituality.

I would like to single out one tension in the Kuyperian tradition that is present on many other Reformed campuses and deserves special attention. Scholars or artists who have grown up in the CRC and its affiliated schools cannot help but feel the tension between personal piety and social action deep in their bones. The complicated history behind it has been detailed by my historian colleague James Bratt (*Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*, 1984). The struggle between pietism and social activism is constitutive of the Kuyperian tradition in North America.

There are two ways in which a constitutive tension becomes debilitating rather than creative in the life of a community. One way occurs when the two sides lock into a battle without resolutions. Then the community's energy gets channeled into rigid, defensive formations until communal paralysis sets in. The other occurs when the two sides go their separate ways and have little interaction. Then the community's energy drains away into projects that no longer represent the best potentials of its tradition.

I am not an historian. But my sense, as an insider on the margins, is that a little of each way has occurred during the past few decades in the CRC and its affiliated schools. More precisely, the pietist and social activist sides have set up defensive for-

mations around controversial social issues such as women's rights, abortion, and gay liberation, and the two sides have gone their separate ways in matters of worship, evangelism, and congregational life. Such a combination of embattlement and isolation does not bode well for the future. It leaves each side free to turn away from the other toward hospitable allies on the larger North American scene—roughly liberalism and post-modernism on the one side, and fundamentalism and the Religious Right on the other side.

It would be a tragedy, I think, if the Kuyperian tradition in North America dispersed itself into the older forces of liberalism and fundamentalism or their more recent successors. For the genius of Kuyper and his followers has been to couple a critique of the modern world with active contributions to transforming it, always out of a deep sense of personal gratitude and calling. One of the challenges facing Reformed institutions is to embody anew that genial spirit of holy worldliness. The best aspects of our tradition's pietism and social activism need to be renewed, not left in rigid battle or nonchalant isolation, but carried forward by a revitalized and more encompassing vision of transformation. One need

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look no further than Abraham Kuyper's meditation on Psalm 42 for a glimpse of what this might mean. I quote from the recent adaptation by James Schaap titled *Near Unto God* (1997):

How often have we truly desired, for God's sake, to be near to [God]?... How often do we authentically thirst for God?...

No creed will satisfy, no nicely formulated idea about God, no relic or symbol. What we need is the living water—and not brackish [sic], swampy stuff either. We need water that tumbles and leaps and rushes, water that is alive.

...Our being near unto God isn't limited by time and space. It's not something that happens only inside stained-glass windows. Zion is a sidewalk, an office, a kitchen, a classroom, a factory, and a library carrel. Zion is where we come to God through Christ. That's where we find our thirst finally relieved by living water. Zion is Christ really, our Mediator and our King, who is...God, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen!

Digging Deeper Wells

That brings me to my final suggestion. It may seem from what I have just said that I wish somehow to recapture some earlier expression of the Kuyperian tradition that was more pure and less diluted. This is not at all my intention. In fact I think such a backward-looking approach, whether nostalgic or dogmatic, is more deadly for a tradition than is outright rejection. What Jürgen Habermas has said about ethnic cultures also applies to religious traditions in the modern world:

When a culture has become reflexive, the only...forms of life that can sustain themselves are those that bind their members while at the same time subjecting themselves to critical examination and leaving later generations the option of learning from other traditions or converting and setting out for other shores....Cultures survive only if they draw the strength to transform themselves from criticism and secession (*Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, 1994, 130-32).

Hence to maintain a tradition is not to isolate it or protect it but to renew it through self-criticism and through dialogue with other traditions. Every tradition that is worth its salt needs to form its own loyal opposition.

But this cannot occur if members of a religious tradition do not care enough about their own sources to pay them close scrutiny. Nor will it happen if no one in the tradition makes the effort to translate its sources into a language that makes them accessible to participants of other traditions. In our own setting, this is one of the urgent tasks facing Reformed institutions of higher education. Who among us is testing the insights and blind spots of Calvin, Kuyper, and Dooyeweerd? Who is exploring and recontextualizing the imagery, music, and stories of the Kuyperian tradition? Who

is translating the central texts and debates of the tradition into a language for the twenty-first century? If we college educators fail to do this, and if our administrations and boards do not give us the incentives and support we need to do this, then we cannot expect our supporters and church communities to embrace a transforming vision.

I grew up on a small farm in north central California. The soil was sandy, the climate hot and dry. Were it not for a wonderful public irrigation system, the area would have been a desert. Because water flowed freely through the canals and ditches, however (just right for swimming in the summer), lush pastures and thriving orchards covered the landscape. Even so, we needed our own well for household and garden use. When the water table dropped, or when too much sand sifted into the well, we would have to drill the well deeper.

Perhaps there's an image here for how our colleges need to relate to the Kuyperian tradition. In each generation we need to dig deep wells in order to release once again the nourishing currents of our intellectual and religious tradition, not simply for ourselves but for all the students, supporters, and future generations for whom we work. But we also need to find channels that allow these currents to flow toward neighboring communities, and to let the best elements of their traditions flow toward us. And through all of this, perhaps, we will also receive and send onward the water of life, in Kuyper's words, "water that tumbles and leaps and rushes, water that is alive." ❖