

Boer's Eight Kuyperian Summary Points

In the "Introduction" to Vol. 1 of my *Studies in Christian-Muslim Relations*, I summarize a number of key Kuyperian ideas that are pertinent in almost any situation.¹ Please understand that "Kuyperian" thinking is broader than Kuyper himself. He founded a tradition that continued to develop along his lines but also beyond him.

1. Kuyper developed his perspective in response to 19th-century secular liberalism in The Netherlands that had become oppressive and intolerant. Kuyper countered it with a type of **thorough-going pluralism** that would allow full scope to all groupings in society to blossom on their own terms, even the secularism that he considered demonic. This was starkly different from secularism that denied others the freedom to define themselves and sought to force them to live by its definition. Specifically, secularism invariably seeks to force religion into a straightjacket of private spirituality and individualism that restricts its expression to a so-called sphere of religion, that is, church or mosque. It seeks to reduce the scope of religion to the sphere of the subjective, while it regards secular knowledge as objective and neutral and exclusively suitable for the public square. Kuyper's form of pluralism would allow for the unfettered development of all religions or worldviews - note the plural - on their own terms, not as defined by secularism, though including secularism.
2. Kuyper posited the **primacy of the religious impulse in human life**. The human race is, first of all, a religious race, a race of believers. This is in contrast to Rationalism, which emphasizes the rational as the centre piece of human life. Everything is based on objective, neutral reason. Reason is the neutral platform on which all people can meet and reason

¹J. Boer, *Nigeria's Decades of Blood--1980-2002* . Vol. 1 of *Studies in Christian-Muslim Relations*. Belleville, Ontario: Essence Publishing, 2003, pp. 16-23. The same material is also found in the same volume on the Islamica page of this website.

with each other. It is not a matter of "religion within the bounds of reason," as Kant would have it, but, rather, of "reason within the bounds of religion," as Wolterstorff of Yale put it so aptly in the title of his book.

Marxism, another strong contender for human loyalty, emphasizes the economic aspect as foundational and sees all culture evolving on basis of economic interests. Empirically, Marxism is probably closer to the facts than is rationalism. There is a close affinity between the influence of economic and religious factors. There is a strong mutual influence on each other. One can argue that there is even a kind of confluence of Kuyper and Marx here, for when people give priority to their economic interests, that interest has in fact become the centre of their religion and life, a new idol. Their religious life imperceptibly changes to accommodate their economic status. I have seen it happen in my own denomination.

Kuyperianism focuses on **religion as the basis of all human life**, with religion seen as the point of ultimate loyalty and value in the lives of individuals and communities. All the other aspects are shaped by the basic categories of the dominant religion, faith, beliefs or worldview in a given society. Of course religion and the other aspects mutually influence each other, but when all is said and done, the foundation of it all is the religious or, if you prefer, faith or worldview.

Among other things, this means that **there is no neutral zone in life like politics, economic or science, where we can all meet as neutral, rational people**. Though Nigerian Christians sometimes seek a solution to the Christian-Muslim controversy in that direction, it is a lost cause, for all these cultural areas rest on that often hidden foundation of worldview, faith or religion. Kuyperian Christians share this insight with Muslims. They have, apparently, come to it independent from each other. Unfortunately, many Christians have been misguided into a dualistic scheme that separates religion from these other areas.

Religion is not only the basis of a life, but it is also **comprehensive or wholistic** in nature. Again, this is an insight that Kuyperians share with Muslims. Both traditions emphasize that religion is a way of life, not merely a slice of life or a sector that belongs to the realm of church and mosque. Both Kuyperians and Muslims produce books and articles exploring the relationship between economics, politics, and other cultural aspects to their religion and regard the latter as basic to it all. Both reject secularism because it seeks to compartment-alize religion and restrict it to a small area of life, to the personal and private. It squeezes religion into a narrow mold that does not fit its genius. Again, unfortunately, Nigerian Christians have by and large inherited a secular definition of their religion, an inheritance that has deprived them of more relevant tools in their relationship with Muslims.

3. **Bare facts are inaccessible to us. We all see facts through the grid of our worldview or faith, never as they are in themselves.** We always observe through the colour of our lens. This explains why people with different lenses often interpret the same events in opposite ways as if they are looking at different realities. During colonialism, missionaries and nationalists in Nigeria interpreted colonialism in opposite ways as I have shown in my 1979 publication. Christians and Muslims interpret the religious situation in Nigeria in opposite ways. Though the objective reality may be the same for all, their worldviews drive them into opposite interpretations of the "facts." It is an objective of this book to aid both parties to look through the other's lens, if not to come to full agreement, at least to reach some degree of mutual understanding.
4. **The human race is appointed as God's vice-gerent** or, as Muslims tend to call it, God's *khalifat*. Humanity represents God in this world and is expected to develop it. Christians know this command as the "cultural mandate." Most varieties of Christianity have unfortunately downplayed this Biblical teaching and separated this cultural mandate from the great

commission, a separation that has encouraged the trivialization of their religion. In fact, though almost all Christians know about the commission, few are aware of the mandate. In Kuyperian thought, this mandate is as crucial as it is in Islam.

5. Kuyperianism recognizes along with Islam **an antithesis between the Christian or Muslim religion and all other worldviews**. There is a basic foundational difference between these religions and competing worldviews that drive them into different directions and account for the different national and regional cultures of this world. This is an antithesis between the Spirit of God and all other spirits. Both religions are keenly aware of this antithesis. Both are also aware of the fact that this antithesis can run right through the heart of so-called true believers, for all experience this battle of the spirits in their own lives when, for example, serious inconsistencies occur between their official religion or worldview and their behaviour.

However, Kuyperianism also recognizes common grace, a term referring to the Spirit of God working in and shaping truth even in philosophies and religions that reject Christianity. The basic antithesis between them remains active deep down in the foundation, but it is relativized at the surface level due to the fact that the Spirit of God reveals important truths to all religions and cultures. Because of this common grace, Kuyperianism gratefully recognizes many aspects of truths in other worldviews or faiths and is thus ready to cooperate with them. That is also the reason I appreciate so much of Islam. The current mode in Islam, certainly among Fundamentalists, is to emphasize the antithesis at the expense of common grace considerations. The result is a strong rejection of any truth in other religions and a militant affirmation of "Islam alone." It has led to a high degree of intolerance. No doubt, this current rejection on the part of Islam is that they have woken up from their colonial and secular slumber and are angry that they have been subjected to such humiliation. In the current atmosphere of

anger and re-assertion, there is little room for anything but antithesis.

6. Evangelicals and Charismatics are very much steeped in individualism and concentrate on individuals, while their Liberal and Ecumenical counterparts have tended to be more concerned with communities and structures. **The Kuyperian tradition will have none of these one-sided perspectives and gives both their due, individuals and communities, people and structures.** The tradition has created structures in various cultural sectors that were to be guided by basic Christian perspectives. Christian newspapers, universities and colleges, labour unions, housing co-operatives, political parties have all been part of the history. The reason for these was the insight that all of these organizations are expressions of different worldviews, faiths, sets of beliefs and values. When the underlying worldview is secular, this does not render them neutral but makes them pursue their goals along secular lines that excludes many Christians principles. Today, Muslims, especially the Fundamentalist variety, are deeply aware of the difference between Islam and secular worldviews as they undergird the various social structures. Hence, like Kuyperians, they are in the process of establishing all kinds of alternative Muslim structures and write extensively about the differences they expect these to make for them.
7. The Kuyperian tradition has a **strong emphasis on pluralism.** It was born, remember, during a time when 19th-century secular Liberalism sought to force all people in The Netherlands into one spiritual or worldview mode, namely that of secularism. The quote from Carpenter summarizes the perspective sufficiently for my purposes at this point. Muslims have always claimed tolerance as their hallmark, but today they are not known by others for it. The Kuyperian version may help both Christians and Muslims to develop a genuine sense of pluralism in Nigeria, for it is a form that allows each community to remain true to itself. It is a threat to domination of one group over another; it is a friendly tool to those who really wish for constructive co-existence.

8. A major motivation for much of the above was Kuyper's **concern for the poor**. His was not merely an abstract philosophical or academic concern. The vision was surely marked by such abstractions, but underneath it all lay his passion for the poor and the oppressed. This is one aspect that has largely gotten lost in the subsequent Kuyperian movement. As the constituency moved up the economic and political ladder, the passion for the poor largely gave way for more middle class concerns. In North America most adherents of Kuyperianism are found in academic and ecclesiastical institutions where the philosophical and theological aspects claim the major attention.

Though Kuyper formed, among other institutions, a **Christian labour union** in order to empower the poor, today Christian labour unions have rough sledding among most North American Reformed. When I personally took up the challenge of empowering nurse aids and other hands-on caregivers to Michigan's elderly by attempting to organize them under the umbrella of the Christian Labour Association, I met a solid front of stonewalling in the Christian Reformed Church, the major heir to Kuyperianism in North America.

The focus of interest is now on correct ideas more than on passion for the poor. After all, the homes for the aged are owned by members of this constituency and organizing their employees is now seen as a threat to their economic interest. Every ideology, even the best, is subject to tinkering and emasculation when the economic status of its adherents has changed upward. Not only is Carpenter's quote above useful as a summary of major Kuyperian thoughts, it is also illustrative of this changed focus in that it avoids any reference to Kuyper's passion for the poor. I am not suggesting that Kuyperians are the only Christians with this passion. Of course not! However, in his own day, Kuyper was definitely ahead of most of his fellow contemporary Christian leaders in providing structures that were effective in overcoming poverty in the long run. His was not the individualistic ameliorative soup kitchen approach; he dealt with the structures needed to

overcome the problem itself.

I introduced Kuyperianism into the Nigerian discussion because it gives Nigerian Christians an alternative to the secular perspective they have inherited from missionaries who were not always aware of the issues or their implications. It is also a perspective that is increasingly recognized internationally and sought after for its positive potentials for a Christian approach to the world and other religions on a global scale. This perspective is hereby offered as a more legitimate interpretation of the Christian gospel that simultaneously is one both Christians and Muslims should be able to live, work and dialogue with. It could become the basis for more fruitful relations between the two faiths. It would enable Christians to withdraw the red flag of secularism they are constantly waving before Islam and that evokes so much negative passion in the Muslim heart over the last century that it has sprouted today's terrorism. May our political leaders become more conscious of the role their secularism has played in creating an atmosphere of terrorism, while they are challenged to check out this Kuyperian perspective in their efforts to find a solution beyond their counter-terrorism. American and Canadian authorities especially will do themselves a favour when they contact Center for Public Justice (Washington DC) and Citizens for Public Justice (Ottawa - www.cpj.ca).