

ABRAHAM KUYPER:

HEIR OF AN ANTI-REVOLUTIONARY TRADITION

by Harry Van Dyke

Introduction

During the commemoration of Kuyper's Stone Lectures in Princeton last February¹ nothing struck me so much as the impression that Abraham Kuyper had been a blazing comet who lit up the sky for a time and then disappeared beyond the horizon; he came from nowhere and then vanished without a trace. Of course we knew better, yet no one so much as mentioned that he had many forerunners and many followers. It is the thesis of this paper that Kuyper rejuvenated Dutch Calvinism—brought it “into rapport with the times”—by building on a movement that was nearly a hundred years old. Kuyper's many followers, who in turn built on him, deserve extensive treatment all their own, something I will not undertake here. His many forerunners, however, each made unique contributions to a tradition that he would utilize and turn to political profit. The following notes on these forerunners may help explain the impact he had in his own day. I would like to introduce you to Bilderdijk, Da Costa, Groen van Prinsterer, Heldring, Wormser, Esser, and Kater.

1. Willem Bilderdijk (1756–1831): Framing a Worldview

Born in the same year as Mozart and dying in the same year as Hegel, Bilderdijk was both an artist—albeit as a poet—and a philosopher—though an amateur one. He straddled the 18th and 19th centuries and was an incorrigible Romantic who resisted the Enlightenment philosophically but also politically. When in 1795 French and Patriot armies inundated his country and installed a Revolutionary regime this practising lawyer refused to swear the new oath of allegiance and was forced into exile. During the Restoration the now old man earned a modest living as a private lecturer in Leyden. He attracted students of some of the better families in the land, “corrupting the flower of our youth” (as one observer noted anxiously) by bitter invectives against the spirit of the age and blistering attacks on the ‘received opinions’ of the ruling elite. He delivered himself of his high-flying harangues harum-scarum, in a dazzling

¹Paper read at the international conference ‘Christianity and Culture: The Heritage of Abraham Kuyper on Different Continents’ held on 9–11 June 1998, Free University, Amsterdam.

display of astonishing erudition. In this impolite way Bilderdijk broke the monopoly of the Regent interpretation of Dutch history, a version which (not unlike British Whiggism) attributed the growth of liberty to the republican forefathers of the ruling middle classes, in disregard of the role of the Reformed church and the House of Orange. Thirteen volumes of his *History of the Fatherland* were published posthumously, as were 16 volumes of his *Collected Poems*.

I want to look with you at one of his poems, a poem which I believe characterizes the Tradition we are here tracing. In his sonnet of 1786, *De Wareld*, Bilderdijk passes in review the great schools of philosophy throughout Western history in order to find an answer to one of the most fundamental questions mankind can pose: What is the world? Can we unlock its secret and know it in its deepest essence? Here is my poor but best approximation of that poem:

The World

What are you, structured frame ‘yond mental powers’ clasp?
Chain of effect and cause, to which there is no end,
Whose possibility the mind can’t comprehend,
Whose actuality our reason fails to grasp?

O deep abyss, where can our consciousness then enter? 5
What are you? Mere appearance, pressed upon the sense?
An imprint of the mind, remaining ever dense?
A notion that we forge, like a conceited mentor?

Or is your being then external to, though near me?
Do you exist? Is not existence just illusion? 10
Or of some other being but a mere effusion?

Thus did I fret myself, until God answered: Hear me!
All things depend on me; whatever is, is mine:
The whole world is my voice, and summons you to fear me.

In the first quatrain the poet wonders whether the mystery of the universe will yield to human understanding. Line 2: Is the world a universal concatenation of causes—as the Stoics taught? Lines 3 and 4: this the mind can hardly conceive: the world just is—but don’t ask how.

The second quatrain gives voice to modern philosophers. Line 6: Is the world mere sense perception—as British empiricism held? Lines 7 and 8: Or a mental impression only, a concept, an idea—as maintained in German idealism?

Thus the octet proceeds, as Danie Strauss points out,¹ from ancient philosophical skepticism to modern philosophical subjectivism which grounds reality in the creative powers of the human mind. The journey has not laid the poet’s quest to rest. Other schools of thought

1D. M. F. Strauss, in *Roeping en Riglyne* (no date; I am using an offprint).

will now be consulted. This marks the turn in the sestet of the sonnet. Line 9: In the Middle Ages solipsism was avoided by affirming the reality of substance, with objective existence outside of oneself. Line 10: But perhaps “existence” is no more than an illusion? Line 11: Or perhaps an emanation from a higher Being—as Neoplatonists believed?

Still the poet finds no rest in any of these answers. His survey of philosophy has only wearied him. So he goes straight to the source of all Wisdom. Here, at line 12, is the real turn in the sonnet: God himself instructs him how to understand the world: The world is a word, and it says: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. That is the conclusion of the matter.

According to the *Bilderdijk* scholar Jan Bosch, this poem contains *Bilderdijk*'s worldview in a nutshell: “the calling voice of God that resonates in the human heart.”¹ Even more importantly, as Bosch also notes, the sonnet marks the “first attempt in Dutch at a Christian totalizing thought oriented to the true Origin of the cosmos.”² Herman Bavinck has remarked that for *Bilderdijk* everything that is, is an image or analogy “pointing to a spiritual world which lies behind it and which reveals something of the virtues and perfections of God”; the creature has no existence in and of itself, and must be given its being from moment to moment by the Creator.³ — To return to the sonnet, I think its significance lies in being an attempt at framing a comprehensive approach to the burden of philosophy, one that proceeds unequivocally from the Christian concept of creation and resolutely renounces all notions of the self-sufficiency of the world and of human autonomy: whatever is, depends on God, and is oriented toward Him in a perpetually restless mode of being. Particularly appealing, I find, is the unabashed confessional stance taken in the middle of a philosophical “dialogue,” but nevertheless a stance that is intensely relevant to this dialogue. In the face of centuries of metaphysical speculation, *Bilderdijk* reaches directly for a biblical response. We know from history that the personal life of the poet was compromised, but not his life-principle. To be sure, the question has been raised—in the splendid intellectual biography that came out earlier this year—whether the sonnet is a true reflection of the poet's own conception at this time,⁴ but this question, however intriguing, is not germane to our inquiry here. What the published sonnet did was adjure contemporaries to resist the temptation to compromise with worldly patterns of thought; it encouraged them not to be timid in the face of the canon of Western philosophy—not to hesitate about the perfect right of Revelation to instruct Reason. *Bilderdijk*'s answer foreshadows Kuyper's emphasis on taking creation as one's starting-point also for thought. True, Kuyper may have claimed a bit too much in his commemoration address on the sesqui-centennial of *Bilderdijk*'s birth,⁵ but he was right in recognizing *Bilderdijk* as a man of importance not only for the Dutch nation but also for the Calvinist revival of the 19th century.

1J. Bosch, “Willem *Bilderdijk* als wijsgerig historievormer,” in *Perspectief*; feestbundel van de jongeren bij het 25-jarig bestaan van de Vereniging voor Calvinistische Wijsbegeerte (Kampen: Kok, 1961), pp. 228–40, at p. 233.

2Ibid., p. 229.

3H. Bavinck, *Bilderdijk als denker en dichter* (Kampen: Kok, 1906), p. 56.

4Joris van Eijnatten, *Hogere sferen: de ideeënwereld van Willem *Bilderdijk** (Hilversum: Verloren, 1998), 84.

5A. Kuyper, *Bilderdijk in zijne nationale beteekenis; rede gehouden te Amsterdam op 1 Oct. 1906* (Amsterdam and Pretoria: Höveker & Wormser, 1906).

Bilderdijk wrote many tracts in defence of the faith of the Reformation, heaping scorn upon its modern detractors. We might not want to go so far as to assert with the author of a popular biography that Bilderdijk carried the old-time religion singlehandedly, Noah-like, from the old world of its near total eclipse into the new world of the 19th century, where it would flourish once more,¹ yet we do appreciate Bilderdijk's historical significance in having been a preserving force in a destructive age. The age was killing the faith of the Reformation but Bilderdijk's pen was one of the instruments that helped to keep it alive, thus inaugurating a tradition that would be both aggressive in confronting modern culture and comprehensive in positing its counterclaims.

2. Isaac da Costa (1798–1860): Challenging the Spirit of the Age

The story of this Sephardic Jew from Amsterdam begins with the conversion of him and his cousin and bosom friend Abraham Capadose around 1818 in Leyden, where both were studying law. The two friends would be lifelong members of the *Réveil* in the Netherlands, a movement that kindled evangelical fervour well beyond the middle of the century. The movement was a revival of Christian faith and the Christian life, the resultant of an indigenous revived Calvinism (such as represented by Bilderdijk) and important influences from abroad, notably Switzerland. The *Réveil* became the nursery of resistance to the dechristianization of Dutch society. Ultimately it was to put Reformed people back in the centre of public life. Its aim was to rechristianize modern culture using modern means, under the motto, “faith working by love.”

The birth-cry of the Dutch awakening is generally held to have been Isaac da Costa's notorious broadside of 1823, *Grievances Against the Spirit of the Age*. In rather intemperate language the tract fulminated against the shallow optimism of the time and derided the complacent beliefs in social progress and human perfectibility. It was a declaration of war on the Enlightenment project as this was beginning to make headway in the Netherlands—a pointed repudiation of that project's basic premise: human autonomy, the banning of Christian principles from the seats of learning and from the public arena.

Public opinion was so scandalized by the pamphlet that its author's home for a time was under police surveillance. The aging Bilderdijk came to the defence of his pupil, but this only added to the ire of liberal newspapers such as the *Arnhem Courant*, which lampooned Da Costa as “the conceited monkey of the old baboon.”² Eventually Da Costa saw himself compelled to abandon his legal practice and spend the rest of his days as a man of letters, as a lecturer (by subscription) on historical and religious subjects, and as the host of Sunday *soirées* where he led in Bible study bathed in prayer and song.³

1Rudolf van Reest, ‘n Onbegriepelijk mens (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1940), 2:80, 92.

2Cf. D. J. A. Westerhuis, “De ‘Arnhemsche Courant’ contra Da Costa ultimo anno 1823,” *Stemmen des Tijds* 14.3 (1925): 370–77.

3See Gerrit J. ten Zythoff, *Sources of Secession: The Netherlands Hervormde Kerk on the Eve of the Dutch Immigration to the Midwest* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 57–97; cf. M. E. Kluit, *Het Protestantse Réveil in Nederland en daarbuiten, 1815–1865* (Amsterdam, 1974), 167.

By mid-century Isaac da Costa had developed into a forward-looking Christian citizen. He espoused the need to update the tools of orthodox Christians in order to help them stay abreast of their times, not just for self-preservation but also for being a more effective witness. Not only would scientific theology have to be taken vigorously in hand, but a progressive political program would have to be developed, in which the eternal principles of the Word of God would be applied to the problems of the day. The Revolution of 1795, and again of 1848, while evil in themselves, had nevertheless afforded ways and means, such as participatory government and disestablishment, of which Christians should avail themselves to contribute to the “unfoldings of God’s counsel for mankind.” We are to be *against* our age, but also *of* our age, he wrote to his friend Groen van Prinsterer.¹ The year before, Da Costa had been instrumental in organizing a voters’ association in his riding in Amsterdam and writing a program for it—“in its essence, a fruit of *the* ages; in its form, of *this* age!”—or as he would put it in another one of his occasional poems: We will not be led by the spirit of the age and its errant light, yet we shall always distinguish the *spirit* of the age from the *course* of the age.²

There was much common sense in Da Costa’s strategy: “The malady of our age must be combated with the means which, by God’s all-wise providence, are given in the malady itself. . . . No abolition of constitutions, no formal restoration of a Calvinist state and church can give us back the historical and truly spiritual principle. . . . The enemy must be conquered, at any rate combated, on his own terrain . . .”³

This last statement foreshadowed the realignment of cultural forces that began to show its initial contours in the 1850’s under the leadership of Groen van Prinsterer.

3. Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801–76): Opposing Principle with Principle

Like Da Costa, Groen van Prinsterer early determined that he had to be in fundamental opposition to the whole tenor of his age. Attendance at Bilderdijk’s private lectures during his brilliant student years at Leyden first sowed the seeds of this nonconformism. Such a stance might have condemned Wim Groen (as he was known) to a lifetime of sterile reaction, were it not for his belief that a third way was possible, a path between revolution and counter-revolution, an approach to problems that would be *anti-revolutionary*—that is, opposed to the “systematic overturning of ideas” whereby truth and justice are founded on human opinion rather than divine ordinance—and simultaneously an approach that would be *christian-historical*—that is, open to revealed norms for human life, corroborated by the experience of

1Da Costa to Groen, 18 July 1852; in *Brieven van Mr. Isaac da Costa*, ed. G. Groen van Prinsterer (Amsterdam, 1873), 2:91–93.

2Isaac da Costa, *Kompleete Dichtwerken*, ed. Hasebroek, 8th impr. (Leyden: Sijthoff, n.d.), 2:253, 3:121.

3Da Costa to Groen, 11 Nov. 1852; in *Brieven van Da Costa*, 2:105f. Cf. J. C. Rullmann, “Da Costa in zijn beteekenis voor de anti-revolutionaire partij,” *Anti-Revolutionaire Staatkunde* 2 (1926): 165–88, 225–44; idem, “Het Réveil en de opkomst der anti-Revolutionaire Partij,” *Anti-Revolutionaire Staatkunde* 4 (1928): 461–76.

the ages.

Like Edmund Burke, Groen appreciated history as “the known march of the ordinary providence of God.” While the Scriptures always had priority for him, he felt it was neither prudent nor godly to fly in the face of past wisdom, particularly where it reflected biblical maxims and gospel mandates.

It was very much Groen’s trenchant analysis of the nature of modernity that determined the strategy for a century of distinctive Christian action in his country. Groen formed a bridge between the spontaneous early protestors Bilderdijk and Da Costa against theological liberalism and the secularization of politics, and the systematic anti-revolutionary theorists that would come after him, such as Kuyper and Dooyeweerd (1894–1977). In his lecture series of 1845–46, published the following year under the title *Unbelief and Revolution*,¹ Groen threw down the gauntlet against the leading lights of his day. The root cause of the malaise of the age, he set forth, was unbelief—unbelief as it was first elaborated into a system and then applied in a social experiment. It was the Enlightenment that had dismissed divine Revelation and the Christian tradition as the basis of society and had replaced them with a twofold “philosophy of unbelief,” one that recognized no truth beyond human reason and no authority apart from human consent. The lectures traced the outworking of this new philosophy: the supremacy of reason produces atheism in religion and materialism in morality, while the supremacy of the human will leads to popular sovereignty in political theory and anarchy in political practice. These logical outcomes had been dramatically revealed in the French Revolution and in all subsequent imitations of that great experiment.

According to Groen, therefore, a correct appraisal of the French Revolution and its aftermath must take into account its profoundly religious impulse. By religion he meant man’s ultimate commitment, either to God or to whatever takes His place. Religion had been the motor of the events that launched the modern world; the Revolution of 1789 was driven by a surrogate religion, namely the ideology of secular liberalism. This ideology was not renounced in the Restoration of 1815. Consequently, the same subversive ideas continued to undermine the foundations of society and to stifle wholesome reform; eventually they would ignite fresh flare-ups of revolutionary violence. Like Tocqueville, Groen came to the disturbing conclusion that the Revolution had become a permanent feature of European civilization. We are living in a condition of permanent revolution, so ended his lectures; revolutions are here to stay and will grow in scope and intensity—unless men can be persuaded to return to the Christian religion and practise the Gospel and its precepts in their full implications for human life and civilized society. Barring such a revival, the future would belong to the most consistent sects of the new secular religion, socialism and communism.²

The political spectrum that presented itself to Groen’s generation offered no meaningful choice in his estimation. The radical left was composed of fanatical believers in the “theory of practical atheism”; the liberal centre was occupied by warm sympathizers who nevertheless cautioned against excesses and preached moderation in living out the new creed; the

¹For an abridged translation, see Harry Van Dyke, *Groen van Prinsterer’s Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution* (Jordan Station, Ont.: Wedge, 1989), 293–539.

²I know of only one British reaction to Groen’s book, appearing after some portions of it were translated into English: D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “The French Revolution and After,” in *The Christian and the State in Revolutionary Times* (London: Westminster Conference, 1975), 94–99.

conservative right included all who lacked either the wit, the wisdom or the will to repudiate the modern tenets yet who recoiled from the consequences whenever the ideology was implemented in any consistent way. Thus none of the three “nuances” of secular liberalism represented a valid option for Christian citizens. Groen ended his lectures with a compelling invitation to resist “the Revolution” in whatever form it manifested itself and to work for a radical alternative in politics, along anti-revolutionary, christian-historical lines. “*Resist beginnings*” and “*Principle against principle*” were to be the watchwords.

When the book came out reactions from Christian friends were most interesting. Aeneas baron Mackay wrote Groen to say that “the Word applied to politics was new to me, and now that I have placed that candle in the darkness I see sorry things, but *I see*.”¹ Elout van Soeterwoude wrote some time later to question the implied vision of a Christian state and a Christian society. Would positing an alternative “principle” suffice? And had so-called “anti-revolutionary forms” ever been more than just Ideal-types, he wondered. “I have always believed,” he objected,

that wherever men feared God they strove after such forms; wherever the Christian religion has lived in men’s hearts since the Reformation, such forms have been realized here and there, yet always but in part, and the more these things weakened and vanished, the more did men depart from them and did the revolutionary spirit gain ascendancy. It was therefore always the good that a few people desired and accomplished—in faith, in the fear and power of God. But it was hardly the principle of the State. Nor will it ever be that. Yet anywhere, at any time, even today, God can raise up leaders who administer affairs for a time in a Christian spirit. Apart from Christ, the principle, even if accepted, is dead. Will the majority ever be Christian? I think not; but [it may] perhaps submit for a time to the power of faith. Therefore your labour is not in vain. . . .²

The poet-theologian Nicolaas Beets had found the book so gripping “that I could not put it down until I had read it all and yesterday afternoon closed the book with a prayer on my lips. . . . Your book makes it clear to me: the nations are walking in ways where no return is likely, no halt avails, and progress is the increasing manifestation of the man of sin. Who can arrest, who can deliver but the Lord alone?”³ Beets’s younger colleague J. P. Hasebroek communicated that *Unbelief and Revolution* had greatly clarified for him the relation between gospel and politics. To be sure, he had always believed that the Word of God, as absolute truth, contained the core of all truths, including the basic principles of all genuine political science; but Groen’s book provided a yardstick “by which all the new phenomena emerging in the politics and society of our time may be measured and evaluated.”⁴ When the book was reissued twenty years later, Professor De Geer of Utrecht made a telling remark. After observing that “unbelief is showing itself more brazen all the time,” he voiced a concern which was Groen’s concern exactly: What are the faithful doing about it? They have no sense, he complained, of what it means to be church. Christian action is paralyzed by internal division and individualism.

1Mackay to Groen, 26 Aug. 1847; in Groen van Prinsterer, *Schriftelijke Nalatenschap*, vol. III: *Briefwisseling*, vol. II (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1964), 810.

2Elout to Groen, 23 June 1849; in *Briefwisseling*, vol. III (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1949), 27f.

3Beets to Groen, 8 Sept. 1847; in *Briefwisseling*, 2:812.

4Hasebroek to Groen, 22 Sept. 1847; in *Briefwisseling*, 2:820f; see also 3:851.

Unbelief can do what it wants: it finds itself opposed by isolated individuals only.¹

It would be another four years before Kuyper would raise his *Standaard* to overcome this individualism by means of a Groenian type of isolationism: that is, to rally the Christian body for developing a collective Christian political mind, and then to orchestrate united Christian action. That mobilization was possible after 1872 because of Groen's lifelong "strategy" of retrenchment, namely to identify the non-negotiables and stand by one's principles. "*In our isolation lies our strength*," he insisted to the tiny party of his followers, explaining: We do not mean thereby that we want to be "political hermits" but that we have a "distinctive point of departure." To establish and preserve one's distinctiveness would keep one's identity intact and one's testimony pure: "I would rather end up in the company of only a few, or if necessary all alone, than abandon a starting point without which we would not only lose our influence but cease being a party."²

Much of Groen's support lay among the (as yet) disenfranchised "people behind the voters." Among them he knew the presence of the Christian body that held him up in prayer, the same body that would later become Kuyper's dues-paying members. It irked the opposition to hear Groen claim that he did not just represent a fraction of the population but the "core of the nation." The party of the "anti-Revolution" was a national party, Groen insisted, "because it is linked to the faith of our fathers and our historical traditions" and its programme "resonates in the Christian conscience of the Dutch people." At the end of his life Groen took comfort from the fact that "as long as I was faithful, the orthodox people were never unfaithful to me."³

Central to Groen's career was his defence of freedom of education. He called it "freedom of religion with respect to one's children."⁴ In parliament and in the press he spearheaded the campaign against the common or comprehensive, religiously mixed government schools for primary education. At first, he and his friends fought for the mere right as private citizens to establish alternative schools. As education progressed and became publicly endowed, he objected to the government monopoly on taxes earmarked for schooling. Groen denied the possibility of neutrality in nurture. In his estimation, modernists were using public education in the hope of transcending religious differences through a strictly rational approach and preparing children to become enlightened adults in a unified society. In practice, the so-called neutrality of the common school, Groen observed in 1861, "grows into the most pernicious partiality favouring unbelief and ends in making proselytes for the religion of reason and nature." The schools struggle, which did not end until the pacification bill of 1920, was Groen's most important legacy to his nation, a nation that escaped a monolithic society based on secular liberalism only when liberals at last were forced to concede that in education there ought to be equal rights or a level playing field for all citizens. It was the schools struggle that would first put Kuyper onto the national stage.

1De Geer to Groen, 11 Oct. 1868; in Briefwisseling, vol. IV (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1967), 261.

2G. Groen van Prinsterer, *Parlementaire Studiën en Schetsen*, 2:336f.

3H. Smitskamp, *Wat heeft Groen van Prinsterer ons vandaag te zeggen?* (The Hague, 1945), 28, 118, 124–28.

4G. Groen van Prinsterer, *Bijdrage tot herziening der Grondwet in Nederlandsche zin* (Leyden, 1840), 89.

4. Ottho Gerhard Heldring (1804–76): Calling for United Action

This country pastor was to give the initial impulse for united Christian action in his country. His parish work had brought him face to face with the wretched conditions of peasants and day-labourers. Inspired by Ezek. 34:4, he became involved in land reclamation, the digging of wells, and literacy programs through conducting night classes and composing readers for the young. He pioneered the establishment of homes for orphans and for neglected children.¹ Since all this cost a great deal of money, Heldring became a master beggar, via letters and visits in *Réveil* circles, to raise funds for his many philanthropic causes. When the Society for the Utility of the Commonweal, active in promoting public education nation-wide, approached him with a lucrative offer for adopting one of his readers, on condition that he suppress certain passages deemed “too sectarian,” the pious author was briefly tempted to compromise. In frustration, - Heldring tried to arouse interest for a more formal, structured approach to works of *Réveil*. What ought we to do? asked his circular letter of 1845; shall we continue our separate ways, or is united action possible?

This initiative resulted in biannual meetings in Amsterdam of the “Christian Friends.” Usually chaired by Groen, these meetings were spent discussing projects, sponsoring activities, and raising funds. The cause of Christian education was also close to the hearts of the Friends. One entire meeting was devoted to the question: Should Christians form a political party? We have no choice, was Groen’s opinion; our constitutional system requires political alternatives. Those who hold to the same principles should band together and try to achieve their goals by proceeding according to well-devised plans to persuade voters and influence law-making. Christians are members of the Nation and as such have rights in the State, as well as consequent duties, namely to uphold these rights and to fulfil these duties in communion with the brothers.

One result of these meetings was the appearance, from time to time, of anti-revolutionary voters’ associations in urban ridings. Another was the regular publication, from 1847 to 1875, of *De Vereeniging: Christelijke Stemmen*, a quarterly edited by Heldring, with contributions in theology, history, literature, inner mission and philanthropy, as well as articles of political analysis and debate. After about a decade, however, the meetings in Amsterdam died out because the Christian Friends could not agree on a common stance against the incursion of modernism in the National Church, some favouring a “juridical” approach (use the church courts to discipline, suspend or defrock offenders) with others recommending a “medical” approach (preach the full gospel, which alone is able, in time, to overcome its deniers).

5. Johan Adam Wormser (1807–62): Abandoning Establishmentarianism

This court bailiff from Amsterdam had his own approach to the challenge of modernity. In his

¹John de Liefde published articles on “Pastor Heldring” in *The Christian Miscellany and Family Visitor*, 1856, 240–43, 272–74; *The British Messenger*, April 1863, 40ff; and *The Sunday Magazine*, Feb. 1865, 321–25.

book of 1853, *De Kinderdoop*, he argued that, factually, almost all Dutch people had received Christian baptism. This meant that the Dutch nation had been sealed into the covenant of grace and thus could lay claim to God's promises. The only thing wanting was that the nation in many respects was either ignorant or negligent of its part of the bargain: to embrace that covenant and dedicate itself in all the ramifications of national life to God. Hence Wormser wrote: "Teach the nation to understand the meaning of its baptism, and church and state are saved."

Wormser agreed with Groen that the worst enemy in the battle for reasserting the Christian character of Dutch society was the world-flight and politicophobia of orthodox Christians. For the country was increasingly being brought "under the sway of the Revolution ideas and their destructive effects." This state of affairs must be turned around. After all, "the question is far from settled whether the nation, just as it formerly exchanged its pagan character for the Christian one, is now disposed to trade its Christian character for an atheistic one." And just because, he added defiantly, the revolution principles "have corrupted *much*, they do not have the right to corrupt *all* our institutions."¹

Clearly Wormser was not yet ready, in the middle of the 19th century, to give up on the ideal of a Christian society. In more sober moments, however, Wormser would write to Groen that perhaps the situation had so altered that a radical reorientation was needed. He felt this to be true in particular for the struggle to keep the nation's schools Christian. He was by no means insensitive, he wrote, "to what is called the national church and our national schools, institutions and character. The memory of what God in his grace has done in our land, and of the public institutions which arose as a result of that, always has much that is precious and appealing to me." But the problem was that amid much spiritual awakening and revival of *persons*, the reformation and revival of time-honoured *institutions* was proving much more difficult. In the growing conflict over the spiritual direction of Dutch society, the nominal Christian character of many institutions might well be removed by the Lord himself, and through the crisis the members of His Body could then grow to greater solidity and independence.² By 1860, both Wormser and Groen, along with many others, divested themselves of the last remnants of thinking in terms of corporate Christianity and Constantinian establishment, to turn to free schools and a free church in a state that would favour the adherents of neither modernism nor orthodoxy. This was to become the guiding idea of Kuyper's public philosophy.

And so gradually a pattern of separatism became visible that had really characterized the anti-revolutionary movement from the very beginning. The so-called line of "antithesis" that ran right through the Dutch nation, making division between orthodox believers and all others, was not an invention of Abraham Kuyper. As early as 1841 Elout van Soeterwoude had to explain to an English anti-slavery activist why Holland's evangelical Christians did not want to open their Abolition Society to "all men of good will" (as Wilberforce had been able to do in England) but had to limit membership to confessing Christians only; time and again it has been our unhappy experience, Elout wrote, that such common undertakings end up banning the Christian basis of the work in favour of a kind of neutrality that lacks the faith that can

1J. A. Wormser, *De Kinderdoop*, beschouwd met betrekking tot het bijzondere, kerkelijke en maatschappelijke leven [Infant baptism, considered in relation to personal, church and social life] (Amsterdam, 1853), 8f, 44.

2Wormser to Groen, 1 April 1844; in *Brieven van J. A. Wormser*, ed. Groen van Prinsterer (Amsterdam, 1874), 1:17f.

overcome the world.¹ And a few years later, when no professorial chair was made available for Isaac da Costa in the city university of Amsterdam despite a long list of prominent names endorsing the nomination, Groen had mused: if Christian principles cannot be brought to our public institutions, perhaps we will wake up to see the need for our own institutions.² Here lie the historic roots of the Dutch phenomenon of “pillarization,” or, as I prefer to call it, *institutionalized worldview pluralism*.³

6. Isaac Esser (1818–85): Instructing the Common People

Groen wrote tough, sinewy prose, in high-brow papers. Fortunately, popularizers of the anti-revolutionary worldview were not lacking. Of these, Isaac Esser, a soap-box evangelist in The Hague, deserves a brief mention. Esser had distinguished himself as an administrator in the Dutch East Indies, where he had combated corruption, prosecuted slave-trade, and actively promoted Christian missions among the natives. Once repatriated, he joined actions against modernism in the national church. Unsuccessful in a bid for a seat in parliament in 1864, he threw himself into the renewed struggle for Christian day schools. His activities ranged from handing out tracts at fair grounds during carnival season, to writing a weekly series of articles on a sound colonial policy, translating psalms into the Malay language, setting up a ragged school, and serving on the Board of Governors of the Free University.⁴

The book *Unbelief and Revolution* had meant a great deal to Esser during disturbances in 1848 on Java, so in 1874 he approached the author for permission to quote extensively from it in a primer that he was composing “for the people behind the voters.” When Groen was shown a sample of the text he advised Esser to abandon the method of using direct quotations and instead turn his “excellent talent for popularization” to good account by saying the same thing in his own words. The upshot was the appearance later that year of Esser’s *Anti-revolutionaire Catechismus, ook voor het volk achter de kiezers*. The booklet has been called “a most peculiar publication in anti-revolutionary history.”⁵ It signalled the conviction among the common people who followed Groen and prayed for him that the Anti-revolution in the country would be nothing if not a grass-roots movement involving thousands of (as yet non-voting) “ordinary” believers. here are a few representative Questions and Answers from Esser’s catechism:

Question 1: What is the infallible touchstone of all that is just and moral, both for nations and private persons?

Answer: Holy Scripture! Unconditional submission to God’s Word, to “*it is written*,” is the guarantee of dutiful obedience as well as dutiful resistance, of order and freedom. *Q. 2:* Are there any other tests of justice and morality? *Answer:* Undoubtedly! History and nature are also tests. Throughout the ages history and nature have

1Elout to Rev. E. Miller, 7 Dec. 1841; in Briefwisseling [of Groen van Prinsterer], 5:793–95.

2Groen to Da Costa, 16 Nov. 1844; in Brieven van Da Costa, 1:188f.

3See Harry Van Dyke, “Groen van Prinsterer’s Interpretation of the French Revolution and the Rise of ‘Pillars’ in Dutch Society,” in *Presenting the Past: History, Culture, Language, Literature*, series Crossways, volume 3 (London; Centre for Low Countries Studies, 1996), 83–98.

4T. Smid, “Isaïc Esser,” *Woord en Wereld* 3 (1966): 205–20, 302–11.

5J. van Wehring, *Het Maatschappijbeeld van Abraham Kuyper*, 53.

taught [mankind] to start with God and to consult experience. . . . *Q. 12*: Do only governments have divine right? *Answer*: By no means! All authorities are God's lieutenants, God's ministers—for your good, writes Paul. We are to obey them for the Lord's sake; they are to obey God. Higher power is a gift of God which is to be used in His service, to the benefit of others and to His honor. The Sovereign bears the image of God on earth, but this is nothing extraordinary or special which he has as a privilege above other people. A father bears the image of God to his child, a judge to the accused, a mistress to her maids. Anybody who is anything or has anything is an image-bearer of God, obligated and called, each according to his gift as a good steward, in the name and according to the example of our Lord, to walk in the good works which He has ordained for us. . . . *Q. 24*: How does the anti-revolutionary see the French Revolution? *Answer*: As a work of unbelief and revolt, of apostasy from the living God and at the same time as a judgment of God. *Q. 25*: How can you prove this? *Answer*: From the plain facts of the revolution. The tree is known by its fruit. . . . *Q. 47*: Is the struggle of our day at bottom a religious struggle? *Answer*: No other. Underneath all the burning questions of our day lies the religious question. It all comes down to this: Who is sovereign, God or man?¹

7. Klaas Kater (1850–1916): Mobilizing the Workingmen

Canvassing the contributions of leaders of the first and second rank, like Groen and Esser, should remind us that the anti-revolution was also very much a grass-roots movement. Many of the orthodox belonged to the common people who in a “census democracy” such as Holland then was often lacked the property or income qualifications to have the right to vote. These “people behind the voters” still awaited their emancipation. Though under the circumstances they were not easily empowered to participate in decision-making for the future, this was not for lack of interest on their part. We hear of a cigar-maker's shop in Amsterdam where one of the workmen would read aloud from the writings of Groen while his fellow workers filled his quota during that time.² The story of the emancipation of the working classes in the Netherlands includes many names, among which Klaas Kater figures large.³

But it all began with another man—with Julien Wolbers (1819–89), the owner of a painting and decorating firm in Haarlem who retired early to devote himself to the promotion of the rising social movement which he wished to influence in a Christian direction. In the summer of 1871 he started a weekly called *De Werkmansvriend*. Despite its patronizing name (“The Workingman's Friend”) the weekly was well received by working-class people who could resonate with the opening editorial, which stated: “The social question is the order of the day. The industrious workman has a right to claim that his wages should be commensurate to his needs and those of his family, and that he ought not to suffer want or be forced to deny himself all physical relaxation and every opportunity to ennoble his mind.” But, Wolbers continued, the improvement of the workingmen's lot depends on their own activity: what they need is “a healthy spirit of self-confidence, coupled with reliance on and invocation of higher blessing.” The editor placed his hope in honest work, duty, piety, education, vocational training, mutual

1I. Esser, *Antirevolutionaire Catechismus* (The Hague, 1874), 3, 7, 18, 48.

2Wormser to Groen, 27 August 1851; in *Brieven van Wormser*, 1:238.

3Cf. R. Hagoort, *Gedenkboek Patrimonium* (Utrecht, 1927), 104–35, 164–80; idem, *De Christelijk-sociale beweging* (Franeker, n.d. [1956]), 70–84.

aid in case of illness, etc., “provided all this is pursued in a sound spirit of moderation and order, and not through violence.” The paper would therefore combat that new manifestation of the Revolution in the world, the International, whose principles

lead workmen to be discontented with their rank and lot, arouse their resentment against those more generously endowed with temporal goods, and excite them to resistance if not revolt. . . . Under the fine-sounding slogans of seeking to progress, of wanting to champion the rights of the workingman, to emancipate labour, to promote liberty, equality and fraternity, they are liberally sowing the seed which, according to our most sacred convictions, will only bear bitter—and for the workman himself—most pernicious fruits. . . . The revolutionary movement is characterized by apostasy from God and the denial of His love and power. We, by contrast, believe that only a turning back to God, acknowledging and obeying His Word, sincerely believing in His grace in Jesus Christ, will promote the salvation, including the temporal well-being, of the workman, as of all men.

Against this background the paper announced its intention to be a clearing house for news about “such workingmen’s associations which, averse to the criminal agitation of the International, aim to ameliorate the workman’s lot in the gradual way of order and law, without violent upheavals.” As he thus opposed the Revolution with the Gospel, Wolbers was pitting Groen against Marx.

Predictably, rival papers run by social democrats warned against mixing “theology” with the social question. In reply, Wolbers reassured them that “no theological disputes, no sermons, no catechism” would appear in *De Werkmansvriend*. “But we cannot imagine a society without religion; where religion is lacking society will not thrive; . . . we believe that the healing of our sick society and the well-being of the workman cannot be attained except through a revival of religion and obedience to God’s Word.” Accordingly, *De Werkmansvriend* intended to deal with the various social issues from a Christian standpoint, “and therefore not without regarding religion as one of the most important factors.” In the present circumstances, they may not be silent observers who know in their hearts that “to forsake God and His service and no longer to honour His Word as the highest law” leads a people to the abyss.

One enthusiastic journalist who joined Wolbers as editor of *De Werkmansvriend* was W. C. Beeremans. Beeremans was particularly interested in giving guidance to the rising labour movement. Writing in 1873 that what was needed was “a return to a Christian society,” he asserted:

there are no purely social questions. Everyone of them, however many there be, must find their solution in Christianity, must be solved according to the demands of God’s laws. . . . To be sure, workmen’s associations are not religious gatherings . . . but is it just, is it fair, timidly to exclude or eschew all religion when discussing social issues?

Beeremans advocated looking to God’s Word rather than “rallying under the red flag.” While recognizing the legitimacy of labour unions and the need for social reform, he objected to a purely horizontal approach to these questions, noting in particular that the widespread negation of divine providence encouraged the working classes to attack the very foundations of society and to put all the blame for their present plight on employers and social institutions. We hear a great deal at union meetings about *brotherhood* and *love of neighbour*, he wrote, but no one

remembers the first and great commandment: *to love God*.

But how “Christian” can trade-unions be? To those who objected that it would be out of the question, for example, to open union meetings with prayer, Beeremans retorted:

Exactly! Herein lies the unhappy condition of our society. It has slid from the foundation of God’s Word, on which it stood steady and firm, to place itself on another soil, in which it must sooner or later sink away . . . Unions will only be useful to the working class in particular and society in general if, there too, men would push their demands more into the background and ask first of all what God demands.

Another contributor to the weekly, J. Witmond, a trained evangelist turned journalist, soon joined Beeremans in his endeavour to arouse interest in a novel venture: organizing an avowedly Christian Workingmen’s Association. Together they persuaded the Amsterdam labour activist, Klaas Kater, to join them.

This initiative would prove historic. Kater, a largely self-taught man, had written a number of candid contributions in *De Werkmansvriend* exposing poor wages and working conditions in a variety of firms mentioned by name. He had been president of a local bricklayer’s union and had begun to play a leading role in the fledgling national federation of labour unions. However, he had felt compelled to resign from the latter, when running into firm opposition to his idea of *samenwerking* (co-operation) with owners and management. Other reasons for his withdrawal were profanity, Sabbath desecration, and flirting with the marxist International. For the time being, Kater was at a loss where else to work for labour reform.

Shortly thereafter, he felt vindicated in having left the national federation when, at the urging of Young Liberals on its board, it adopted a change in its constitution by which it came out strongly in support of the “promotion and extension of neutral public primary and secondary education.” Kater now agreed, when approached by Beeremans and Witmond, that Christian workmen had no choice but to create an alternative by forming a parallel organization. To remain silent in the face of such “senseless demands,” made, it was claimed, on behalf of “the workingmen of Holland,” was tantamount to “denying Christ [and] contributing to the ruin of our people as a Christian nation.”

The three men called a meeting on 3 January 1876 where preparations were made for a distinctively Christian social organization embracing employers and employees and taking for its basis, direction and goal “Him who is the centre of world history and outside of Whom there is no salvation.” Out of this initiative was born the organization named “Patrimonium”—the name being indicative of the members’ determination to stand on guard for the national Christian “heritage.” In the very month that Groen lay dying—May 1876—a constitution was drafted and an organization launched that would represent the anti-Revolution in the world of labour.

Kuyper’s *Standaard* at first did not pay much attention to this new development. On several occasions Kater complained to the editor-in-chief of being ignored.¹ Before long, however, Patrimonium was the largest social organization in the Netherlands. Although in later decades it would be eclipsed by separate organizations for workingmen and for employers, nevertheless a pattern was set: for the socio-economic sector, too, Holland’s Christians (not the churches or

¹Kater to Kuyper, Dec. 12, 1877; Aug. 8, Aug. 11, Nov. 10, 1879; see letters in Kuyper-archieff, Documentatiecentrum voor het Nederlands Protestantisme, Free University, Amsterdam.

the clergy) ran their own distinct organizations in a bid, along with other-minded, parallel organizations (such as bread-and-butter unions and the social democratic movement) to influence the future conditions of the daily workplace. To this day, consociational democracy in the Netherlands is also reflected in the institutionalized worldview pluralism of its socio-economic structure.¹

Our interest here lies with a number of distinct expressions and formulations found in Patrimonium's Constitution as well as in the commentary written by Kater, its first president. The founding fathers were very conscious of the fact that they were adding a new branch to the anti-revolutionary movement in the land. Article 1 stated that the organization accepted "God's Word and the traditions of our people as the trustworthy foundations of a Christian Society," and Article 2 listed among the means of promoting its aims: propagating its principle, holding meetings, studying history, aiding widows and sick or injured workmen, sponsoring a popular book series, operating a library, and establishing trade schools and consumer and housing co-operatives. Curiously, an earlier pamphlet had specified for the library that it should be "a library in which, for example, the works of Groen van Prinsterer have a prominent place"—rather appropriate for an organization whose president had addressed its membership at the start of a meeting as "spiritual sons of the late lamented Groen van Prinsterer."²

After Patrimonium received a royal charter in March 1877, Kater was invited to introduce the new organization to the readers of *De Werkmansvriend*. He emphasized that the guiding principle of Patrimonium in the social sector would be *samenwerking*, the harmonious co-operation of all who acknowledged God and His Christ as the supreme ruler and whose aim in life was to glorify His Name, irrespective of the class to which they belonged. We demand recognition as members of society, he explained, as creatures who may not be suppressed or exploited. Class distinctions should be reduced, mutual aid encouraged, and injustices set right. By what means? Not by coercion, but by persuasion:

We believe that the fate of the world is guided by an Almighty hand, wherefore we are unwilling to stretch forth the hands of violence to seize the property of others: nor do we wish, by resorting to compulsion when circumstances seem favourable to us, to appropriate to ourselves what He has entrusted to others.

No doubt such phrases might have lulled some employers to sleep. But docility was not the intention. Boldly Kater addressed the structural violence embedded in a capitalist society:

But should the rich of this world wish to administer the goods entrusted to their stewardship exclusively to their own benefit, to use them solely for their own advantage, then we affirm that in this regard the doctrine of Proudhon is altogether true: "Property is theft." Hence we wish, in accordance with the Word of God, to testify against every form of violence that exalts itself against Him, whether it proceeds from workingmen or from whomsoever. Accordingly, we reject all strikes, as fruits of the revolution. But we also condemn every association of money or power entered into for the purpose of

¹Cf. Michael P. Fogarty, *Christian Democracy in Western Europe, 1820–1953* (Notre Dame UP, 1957), chaps. xv-xviii; Arend Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* (Berkeley: California UP, 1968), *passim*.

²Hagoort, *De Christelijk-sociale beweging*, 52.

securing a monopoly.

Kater had read his Groen well. The latter had been very critical of the new socio-economic developments inspired by liberalism. In a series of pamphlets of 1848 Groen had written:

Our worst ailment is pauperism. Poverty, no work; ruptured relations between the higher and lower classes; no bond save wages and labour; proletarians and capitalists. Whither will this lead? That is uncertain. But there is no doubt whence it came.

It came from 'Liberty and Equality' as understood by the Revolution. Just one detail. When that slogan was first raised, guilds and corporations too had to go. The desire was for free competition; no restraints on skills and industry; no hateful monopoly exercised by individuals or societies; then the development of private initiative and commerce would guarantee a better future. The future that was envisioned has arrived. Can it be called better? *I am of one voice here with the leading spokesmen of the present-day revolution.* It is this liberty, this unrestricted competition, this removal, as much as possible, of the natural relationship of employer and employee, which tears the social bonds, ends in the dominance of the rich and the rule of the banking houses, robs artisans of regular sustenance, splits society up into two hostile camps, gives rise to a countless host of paupers, prepares for the attack by the have-nots on the well-to-do and would in many people's eyes render such a deed excusable and almost lawful. It has brought Europe to a state so dreary and sombre as to cause many to tremble and cry out: Is there no way to revive, in some altered form, the associations that were so recklessly crushed under the revolutionary ruins?¹

Kater, as he echoed these sentiments—including his bow to Proudhon— was not merely harking back to a radical outburst by his venerated statesman. His boldness was borne up by deep-seated convictions. His article of April 1877 in *De Werkmansvriend* concluded with these words:

To this end we await the help of Him who has made the heavens and the earth, and we call out to all, be they rich or poor, of gentle or humble birth, employer and employee: Join us, so that our dear fatherland, our cherished royal house, and all inhabitants of these lands so richly blessed of God, may be preserved from the Spirit that is not of God, from the ruinous plans of the revolution.

The new organization attracted many members. Here was a "brotherhood" that did not disregard their Christian loyalties but appealed to them! As well, Patrimonium's initiative in setting up housing cooperatives met a great need. Besides attending to social concerns, members also gave their support to the ARP, hoping for a kinder dispensation some day. Often not voters themselves, they volunteered for election campaigns and helped round up voters on election day.

Understandably, a little over a decade later, Patrimonium's leaders expressed grave disappointment at the slow progress in social reforms made by the first Anti-Revolutionary cabinet, the Mackay Ministry of 1888–91. Our own parliamentarians, Kater stated forthrightly in his annual presidential address of Nov. 1890, don't feel our misery because they stem from the aristocracy. He added ominously: if the ARP does not soon field some candidates from the

1G. Groen van Prinsterer, *Vrijheid, Gelijkheid, Broederschap; toelichting op de spreuk der Revolutie* (The Hague, 1848), 83f (emphasis added).

working classes, our members are thinking of starting a Christian Labour Party.¹ At this, Kuyper took alarm. At once he began to take steps towards organizing a Social Congress to address the social question in solidarity with all the brothers, of whatever class or station in life. There he would, in his opening address, call for “architectonic critique” of existing society.² There he would pray the prayer repeated on many lips afterwards: “They cannot wait, not a day, not an hour.”³

8. Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920): Seizing the Initiative

And now we come to the heir of all these personalities, voices, publications, to the man who like no other succeeded in turning this rich tradition to political profit. The broad outline of Kuyper’s career is familiar enough not to be repeated here. I hope as well that it is superfluous to bring to mind about this towering giant that he did not *single-handedly*, between the age of 35 and 49, create a daily newspaper, a political party, a separate university, and a new, orthodox Reformed denomination. In each case he was a *co-founder*—a leader, inspirer, genius, to be sure, but always surrounded by a score of peers who acted as Kuyper’s collaborators and assistants, advisers, supporters and critics. More to the point for us may be to listen to a statement of his deepest motivation. In 1897, looking back over his career thus far, Kuyper, then 60 years old, composed a little poem (adapting one, he admitted, by Da Costa⁴), which he recited at a public reception honouring his 25-year editorship of *De Standaard*. In translation, the poem runs somewhat as follows:

1Jaarboekje van het Nederlandsch Werkliedenverbond Patrimonium voor 1891 (Amsterdam, 1891), 81–85.

2Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, ed. James W. Skillen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1991), 51.

3Cf. also Harry Van Dyke, “How Abraham Kuyper Became a Christian Democrat,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 33 (1998): 420–35.

4Cf. Isaac da Costa, *Kompleete Dichtwerken*,

My life is ruled by but one passion,
 One higher urge drives will and soul.
 My breath may stop before I ever
 allow that sacred urge to fall.
 'Tis to affirm God's holy statutes
 In church and state, in home and school,
 Despite the world's strong remonstrations
 To bless our people with His rule.
 'Tis to engrave God's holy order,
 heard in Creation and the Word,
 upon the nation's public conscience,
 Till God is once again its Lord.¹

After his two-stage conversion—first as a theology student, then as a young pastor—Abraham Kuyper determined that he wanted to master what he decided had been the strength of the core of the nation: historic Calvinism. He would revive the 16th-century confession of Calvin and Beza, develop the theology of Voetius and the fathers of Dordt, and update the public philosophy of Hotman, Languet and Marnix. For obtaining works in the latter category he wrote to the best guide available: Groen van Prinsterer. Groen responded by recommending the “founding fathers” of modern Christian-historical constitutional law: Edmund Burke, François Guizot, and Friedrich Julius Stahl; for good measure, he also sent him packages of complementary copies of his own works. Kuyper devoured them, and began to spread the word in lectures to a student club in Utrecht, the place of his second charge. After moving to Amsterdam and starting his newspaper, made possible in part by Groen's munificence, there followed an amazing collaboration between the two publicists: in commentary on public affairs they passed the ball to each other, Kuyper in his daily *De Standaard*, Groen in his biweekly *Nederlandse Gedachten*. On one occasion Kuyper wrote: “Thanks for your formulation on p. 203 of your latest instalment: it will be the text for my next talk to the students.”² And thus was

1A different metre may work better in English, as follows:

As for me, in my life I shall always be striving
 —my mind and my heart be impelled to give all—
 may breathing forsake me, my heart stop its beating,
 before I abandon that most sacred call:
 It is to establish, in home and in schooling,
 in church and in state and on every terrain,
 the laws that our God has ordained for his creatures,
 and thus help our people their bearings to gain.
 And so to impress on the mind of the nation
 the order revealed in Creation and Word
 that the people repent and submit to His statutes—
 again be a nation whose God is the Lord.

2Kuyper to Groen, 10 Nov. 1873; in Briefwisseling, 6:468, 473). The reference is to *Nederlandsche Gedachten* of 22 Oct. 1873, in which Groen had written: “In the Calvinist Reformation according to Holy Scripture, in the history of their and our martyrs' church, lies the source and safeguard of the

born Kuyper's earliest statement in political philosophy: *Calvinism: Source and Safeguard of Our Constitutional Liberties*.¹

As a trained theologian, a church historian by predilection, and an ordained pastor by profession, Kuyper gained national prominence especially as a talented journalist. Friend and foe read the scintillating editorials in *De Standaard*, a daily newspaper launched on 1 April 1872. In late 1873, in a by-election for the Second Chamber in Gouda riding, sympathizers with Groenian politics and subscribers to *De Standaard* nominated—without the candidate's prior permission, as was quite customary—as their favourite son: “Dr. Abraham Kuyper, pastor in the Reformed Church of Amsterdam.” The first round was inconclusive: 957 votes for the liberal candidate, 767 for Kuyper, and 599 for the candidate supported by Catholics and conservatives. As a show of voter strength, it pleased Kuyper greatly, as it did Groen. But the numbers indicated that the run-off election might actually go Kuyper's way; would he then have to accept and leave the parsonage to enter parliament? Kuyper agonized over the possibility. And sure enough, the results on January 21 were: 1252 votes for the Liberal candidate, as against 1504 for the Anti-revolutionary. Kuyper's soul-searching intensified. His published correspondence with Groen shows that it took him a full three weeks before he accepted.

What held him back? He complained of lack of clarity and certainty about a concrete platform to stand on. “One thing would give me courage,” he wrote the old man in The Hague; “if I had a set goal and could see a path plotted toward it.” Then he continued: “Tomorrow I shall therefore set my thoughts on paper. Then I shall send these to you, to approve or put aside.” Two days after came the “loose thoughts,” as the writer himself called them. “You will appreciate my purpose,” he wrote Groen. “Accepting a seat is to me like accepting a mandate, so I feel the need to know what direction to follow and what to undertake. I cannot take a *leap in the dark*. Therefore I beg indulgence for my sketch. If it is all wrong, tell me freely. But at least give me the assurance . . . that your prudence has gone over the thought of the young man.”

The “sketch” consisted of a memorandum of only 1500 words and displayed its author's political instinct, foresight, boldness, and above all, principled pluralism. Here are some lines²:

We should distinguish between what the anti-revolutionaries pursue as a *party* and what they present as a *general* political program to the nation as a whole. Only like-minded men can work for the former; the latter can be promoted by men of all parties. The former could become the latter only if the whole nation were converted to anti-revolutionary principles.

To anticipate the future we ought to take our cue from the situation, in which the conservatives are dying away, the liberals, drawing no recruits from the younger generation, are destined for one part to revert to conservatism, for the other to vanish into the radical wing, with the result that when the

blessings of which 1789 gives the treacherous promise and the wretched caricature.”

1Het Calvinisme, oorsprong en waarborg onzer constitutionaele vrijheden (Amsterdam, 1873); Eng. trans. in James D. Bratt, ed., Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 281–317..

2From the Memorandum presented to Dr. G. Groen van Prinsterer van Prinsterer by A. Kuyper during the latter's deliberation re accepting a seat in the Second Chamber, 4 Feb. 1874; published in Briefwisseling, 6:735–38.

generation now being educated at our secondary schools and universities is ready to take its place in society it will no longer be possible to stop the triumph of revolutionary radicalism unless we at this early stage take position at the head of the movement and seize the initiative in further developing our constitutional forms in a strictly neutral [non-partisan] sense, in order to avert a development in a positively anti-Christian spirit. Failing to do this, we shall inevitably be forced by future developments into the corner of reaction, forfeit our influence on public opinion, and in the end find our shameful place between ultramontanists and conservatives.

Apparently, Christian politics in Kuyper's mind was not an endeavour to establish a "Christian society" in some theocratic sense. Neither was it the work of a lay "pressure group" or "special interest group." Rather, as he put it, Christian politics "must offer a *modus vivendi* even to the opponent." The memo continued:

Our basic principle may not be an attempt to impose Christianity by force, open or indirect, but rather should be the belief that if Christianity is to regain its free and unhampered place in society it is only in and through the nation's and the individuals' *conscience* that it shall rule and thereby liberate state and society.

For this reason, no demanding any privileges; no ignoring the new phase political life has entered in part due to the Revolution; no attempts at subverting our civil liberties; but an effort to make them good and to graft them onto a better root.

Proceeding from these premises, the fact will have to be recognized that our present constitutional order . . . has not kept pace with the evolution of political life at the grass-roots level, is a sheet of ice underneath which the water has flowed away, and lacks even the vitality to catch up to the political evolution the nation is undergoing.

From this it follows that our party (1) must take up position not behind but in front of today's liberalism; and (2) must characterize that liberalism as stationary and conservative, hence ought to choose as its objective a revision of the Constitution, not in a partial but in a general sense. Our party, too, must be liberal, but in contrast to revolutionary liberalism it must stand for a Christian liberalism, different in this sense that it seeks a liberalism not against or without Christ but returning thanks to Him, a liberalism not against or without a historic past but accepted as the fruit of that past, a liberalism not restricted to the confines of our Constitution but in place of that strait-jacket offering a garment in which the nation can breathe and grow freely.

To this end the Constitution is to be purged of whatever tends to cause the State, in spite of itself, to favour its own form of religion, which must necessarily be anti-Christian in character. Purged of whatever separates the State from the life of the nation. Purged of whatever restricts the free course of the Christian religion. Purged, finally, of whatever obstructs the free development of the organic life of the people.

How would all this be applied concretely? Kuyper devoted a number of paragraphs to each of the major political issues. By way of illustration, this is how his paragraph on education begins:

Education is to be under the direction, regulation and inspection of the State.

For higher education the State is to endow a state university with fixed assets, in order that it may develop itself as a corporation solely in accordance with the innermost law of science. No appointment of professors by the State, only curators, by the Crown, from nominations.

To the free universities which one may wish to found in addition, the same benefits are to be

assured in respect of titles and degrees, not as regards endowment.

Only in this way can a Protestant university come into existence at Utrecht and a Roman Catholic one at 's-Hertogenbosch, as the vital centres of the two large elements of the nation. . . .

No one knew if this vision was practicable or just a pipe-dream, but Kuyper accepted his seat in parliament and embarked on a round of feverish activity. His maiden speech was about the social question, in particular child labour. He supported the Anti-School Law League, helped organize the People's Petition against the Liberal school bill of 1878, and in the following year achieved a national federation of anti-revolutionary voters' associations, resulting in the Anti-Revolutionary Party, with which local cells of the League soon merged.

It is still a thrill to read the series of broad-ranging, brilliant articles of 1878–79 in which he explained the new party's political program. They articulated an inspired vision for the public square by a student of Calvinism, a disciple of Groen, and, incidentally, an admirer of Gladstone. The articles appeared in *De Standaard* between April 1878 and February 1879 and have been systematically analyzed by McKendree Langley in terms of Christian thought, long-term goals and short-term electoral outcomes.¹

Conclusion

Our conclusion is clear. Kuyper steeped himself in a tradition that was nearly a century old. He reaped where many others had sown. He mobilized a people already armed, elaborated a worldview and a program of action already sketched, accelerated a movement already in motion. Of course he was more than the sum of his inheritance, the upshot of historical antecedents, a vector of historical forces. He was also unique. But only against the backdrop of his historical context are we able to assess just how unique Abraham Kuyper really was.

[May 1998, rev. July 1998]

¹McKendree R. Langley, *Emancipation and Apologetics: The Formation of Abraham Kuyper's Anti-Revolutionary Party in the Netherlands, 1872–1880* (Ph.D. thesis; Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, 1995).