Abraham Kuyper, South Africa, and Apartheid

by GEORGE HARINCK

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George Harinck, Director of the Archives and Documentation center of the Reformed Churches, Kampen, and staff member of the Historical Documentation Center for Dutch Protestantism at the Free University of Amsterdam, is the author of numerous publications on the history of Dutch Protestantism and its international relations. He delivered these remarks at the opening ceremony of the Abraham Kuyper Institute for Public Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, at the Nassau Inn on February 1, 2002.

Last year, When I was a visiting scholar at Princeton Seminary, I was asked by my friend Max Stackhouse to write a book on Abraham Kuyper (1873-1920) and apartheid. During my research I found out that since 1975 the topic of Kuyper and apartheid has been well known in the international academic world. And it is common knowledge in the English speaking world that Abraham Kuyper is one of the fathers of apartheid. But in the Netherlands this topic is rather unknown. Is that not strange?

Dutchmen know Kuyper of course. He founded one of the ten Dutch universities, the second largest Reformed denomination in the country, one of the three most influential political parties of the last century, and he was their prime minister from 1901 until 1905. The Dutch know about apartheid too. Many kuyperians were active in the anti-apartheid movement. Just because they were related to the white Reformed churches in South Africa, and just because the Free University was related to Potchefstroom University, the Dutch Calvinists were all the more opposed to apartheid. In the 1975 they severed their ties with white churches and white universities and started to support black churches and black universities instead. When Alan Boesak said that to the black South Africans "the God of the Reformed tradition was the God of slavery, fear, persecution, and death," the Dutch Calvinists blamed this on the Boers, not on Kuyper.

The absence of the Dutch in the international Kuyper-apartheid debate has not been noticed, but it is a missing link and it certainly influenced the course and scope of the debate. For example, the relation between Kuyper and South Africa, between his Calvinism and the Calvinism of the Boers, plays a formative role in the debate. Many South African, American, and English sources on this topic do contain some information on what Kuyper said about South Africa, but they never tell why and when he said so. Kuyper is simply considered to be a Boer with the Boers and a Calvinist with these Calvinists. But in reality he had an ambivalent relationship with South Africa and its white inhabitants, and hundreds of pages have been written about it in Dutch.

Kuyper's interest in the Boer cause had two aspects: a national, and a Calvinistic one. As for the national aspect, the Boers were a cognate people. The Dutch usually neglected them, but in the period of the Anglo-Boer wars, from 1880 until 1900, they changed their attitude and ardently supported the Boers against imperialistic Britain. Why this change? For a very interesting reason. The Netherlands was a small nation that feared its future as an independent nation in Europe.

1 Allan Boesak, Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition, ed. Leonard Sweetman (Maryknoll: Orbis 1984), 83
Germany was the rising power in the east, and England was the mighty world power at its west side. Under these conditions, the Boers functioned as an anchor of hope to the Dutch: in the Boer opposition to the British in Africa the Dutch recognized their will to survive in Europe. Kuyper was at the head of this nationwide pro-Boer movement. Petitions were offered to the British government, and streets and squares were named after famous Boer generals. But sympathy for the Boers vanished as suddenly as it had risen. When the Boers lost the war in 1902 the Dutch forgot about them, Kuyper included.

Soon after 1880 Kuyper was already disappointed by the Boers, not so much because they lost a war they never could have won, but because they were not interested in his Calvinistic ideals. According to Kuyper a true Dutchman was a true Calvinist, and in the Boers he had meant to find a true specimen of the classic God-fearing Dutchman. He even considered that the Boers might play a role in his plan to restore and renew the position of the Calvinists in church and society. But to his disappointment, the Boers were unwilling to set foot on Kuyper's stage. That is why he turned his back on them in 1885. His famous brochure on *The Crisis in South Africa* published in 1900, is more anti-British than it is pro-Boer.

Kuyper never went to South Africa and his decision to visit the United States and Princeton in 1898 is more than accidental. He had realized that the future for Calvinism lay not in Africa, but in America. He easily left behind the nationalistic South African dimension of his Calvinism, for it was Calvinism, not nationalism that guided him. The fact that Kuyper's sympathy for the Boers was as serious as it was short, has only recently come to light in the international debate on Kuyper and apartheid. In recent years distinctions have been made between Kuyper and the South African interpretation of Kuyper, between Kuyper's neocalvinism and the Calvinism of the Boers. As a result the role of Kuyper in the apartheid debate is diminishing. Had the Dutch participated in the Kuyper-apartheid debate, such distinctions would have been drawn much earlier.

One possible reason the Dutch were absent from this international debate is that in the nineteenth, and for a long time in the twentieth century, race was not an issue in Dutch society. The impulse for Dutch involvement in the anti-apartheid movement was not their own experience with racial issues, but the fact that the Boers were related to them. The same was true in the nineteenth-century world of Kuyper. In his publications race is not a category. A dear example of this is that the distinction he made between white and colored people in his 1898 Stone lectures only appeared in the American edition. In the Dutch edition it would have made no sense.

Race was not an issue in Kuyper's thinking. But it is clear that his publications presuppose the superiority of the white race and western civilization. Time and again he mentions the African people in a negative sense, for example in his Stone lectures—and his audience agreed with him. We deplore the fact that he did not unravel, but instead followed the prejudice of his time. Yet, his attitude towards race is not so monolithic that he should be considered an outright racist. Kuyper's Stone lectures do not argue for the superiority of race or civilization, but for the superiority of Christianity. It is not always easy to distinguish between the two, but it is dear that, for Kuyper, historic development is not a process determined by race. Neither is the superiority of race fixed, but can be lost by the white and gained by the yellow race—as Kuyper himself wrote. The black people that according to the exegesis of his days lived under the curse of Ham could receive the blessing of the Lord. Decisive in Kuyper's thinking on history and civilization is in the end not race or historic development, aspects that are beyond our control, but Christianity, and the human responsibility to choose for God.

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2 A. Kuyper, *Calvinism: six Stone-lectures*, (Fleming H. Revell Company, New York 1899), 271: “whether one is to be born as a girl or a boy, rich or poor, dull or clever, white or colored or even as Abel or Cain, is the most tremendous predestination conceivable in heaven or on earth.” The words in italics are missing in the Dutch edition.
According to Kuyper, "Calvinism was bound to find its utterance in the democratic interpretation of life; to proclaim the liberty of nations; and not to rest until both politically and socially every man, simply because he is man, should be recognized, respected and dealt with as a creature created after the Divine likeness." Later, kuyperians recognized the historical limitations of Kuyper's scope and did not hesitate to add racism to the list of evils Kuyper's Calvinism must combat.

They had good reason to do so, for there is evidence that Kuyper applied his Calvinistic conviction of the equality and responsibility of man not only to the position of women or the poor, but to the position of colored people as well. In 1896 he formulated rules for church planting in the Dutch East Indies, where Kuyper's churches had their main mission field. In these rules he stated that, according to the gospel, different races and nations had to live together in one church. This unity might only be broken up in case of difference in language or confession.

In 1901, the year Kuyper became prime minister of the Netherlands, he introduced an important change in Dutch colonial politics, when he introduced the so-called ethical policy. The basics of this policy were an application of his view of human equality and of the responsibility of people and races to spend their superiority in the service of God. In the program of his administration he described the responsibility of the Dutch nation towards the East-Indian peoples as guardianship, over against the realities of colonization or exploitation. The underlying idea is dear: the Netherlands were not allowed to abuse their superiority over the Dutch East Indies. I do not deny the paternalistic character of this view, but this policy marked a major advance over the nineteenth-century Dutch colonial policy of exploitation. And it shows that Kuyper was not guided by the culture of racism of his day, but by his Calvinistic creed of human equality.

This is the way the Dutch understand Abraham Kuyper. They certainly do not have the final clue to all the challenging and sometimes disturbing opinions about Kuyper, but I hope I have made clear my case, that a Dutch kuyperian voice can add something to the international Kuyper debate and research. I am grateful that Princeton Seminary has shown a real interest in its historic Dutch connection, and I hope this Abraham Kuyper Institute for Public Theology will fuel the relationship and use its excellent location in Princeton Seminary to further the intentional Kuyper dialogue and outreach. I would like to congratulate Princeton on the opening of this institute, also on behalf of the president of the Free University of Amsterdam, and I hope Max Stackhouse and his staff will succeed in making this Institute like the aeolian harp Kuyper wrote about at the end of his last Stone lecture: its strings tuned aright, ready in the window, awaiting the breath of the Spirit.

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3 Kuyper, Calvinism, 27
4 J.C. Adonis, Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou: Die verstregenging van die sendingsbeleid van die Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika met die praktyk en ideologie van apartheid in historiese perspektief, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1982), 59.