

Tim Blackmon, senior pastor American Protestant Church Den Haag, op het symposium De Internationale Relevantie van Abraham Kuyper en het Neocalvinisme op woensdag 11 september 2013, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

When Barack Obama swore his oath to the presidency the second time, he placed his hand on the tattered and worn Bible of Martin Luther King Jr. While some appreciated this nod to the slain civil rights leader, noted scholar Cornel West, publicly voiced his concern.

West was upset. He believed Obama was using Martin Luther King's name in vain.

He said: "I'm upset because you don't play with Martin Luther King, Jr. and you don't play with his people. And you don't just play with the black tradition that produced it."

"All the blood, sweat and tears that went into producing a Martin Luther King, Jr. generated a brother of such high decency and dignity that you don't use his prophetic fire as just a moment in a presidential pageantry, without understanding the challenge he presents to all of those in power, no matter what color they are."

West's blood was boiling because the righteous indignation of Martin Luther King had now become a moment of political calculation. His fear is that this silences the prophetic voice and subversive power.

West says: Don't hide and conceal his challenge. Don't tame it with your hand on his Bible. Don't you dare sanitize, deodorize and sterilize Martin Luther King.

I sometimes wonder if the same case could be made for the way American Christianity has self appropriated the legacy of Abraham Kuyper.

Certainly the popularity of Abraham Kuyper on American soil has been well documented.

Prime Minister Kuyper has formed a post-mortem coalition among American Christians. Now the Bible believing evangelicals at Baylor University in Texas, the tofu eaters at the Graduate Theological Union in San Francisco, as well as the neo Calvinists from Princeton, Pasadena and Grand Rapids have all become Kuyperian co-belligerents.

You'd almost think it was a joke: A mainline liberal, a fundamentalist Baptist, a tattooed emergent in skinny jeans and a confessional Calvinist walk into a bar ... except this is no joke.

You can't pick up a book about cultural discipleship, printed in the United States, without finding a reference to Abraham Kuyper's nearly exhausted slogan about "Every Square Inch."

Lest our familiarity breed contempt, I will from now on refer to that famous slogan about the sovereignty of God over every square inch, as  $E^2$ . Let's just call it  $E^2$

Of course, we can see why  $E^2$  has struck such a chord with Christians in the United States. I can think of many reasons, but let me just give four.

Just like Kuyper, American Christians want a religion that makes a noticeable difference in common affairs and temporal realities. American Churches from 'Dan to Beersheba' share deep convictions with Abraham Kuyper about an eminently practical, relevant and activistic faith that produces measurable and visible results.

Secondly, Kuyper's world transformational aspirations are easily hijacked for popular consumption by the sellers of the American glory story.

Also, American Christians love  $E^2$ , because liberal mainliners, the fundies and the evangelicals all have a secret crush on political power and influence.

Finally, American religion also shares Kuyper's personal story; The story of a man's formal religion leading to a deep personal faith, a genuine change of heart spilling over into daily life and making an impact on the world. That's a quintessentially American religious story.

But, I wonder, are we just playing with Abraham Kuyper?

A lot of blood, sweat and tears went into producing an Abraham Kuyper.

Have we hijacked his slogan, ripping it away from the tradition that produced him? Are we using Kuyper's prophetic fire for political pageantry?

I agree the quintessential Kuyperian aspirations can be a breath of fresh air for the rank and file American Christian. But, this is 2013 and what Christian DOESN'T think God is a big deal? What Christ follower wants to stay stuck in an ecclesiastical holy-huddle of us four and no more?

I wonder if it is possible for us to understand Kuyper without going back to the primary sources of the tradition that gave us Kuyper.

In Dr. Mouw's recent book, he acknowledges Kuyper gave the church a fairly limited role in the overall picture of cultural obedience." (page 99, Mouw)

He also states that he wants to promote the cause of a more ecumenical Kuyper, a broadly evangelical theologian who promotes the rule of Christ in just about every Christian theological system. (page 87)

I wonder. As a pastor of an ecumenical church, a church made up of 50 nationalities and literally just as many denominations; an international, intercultural, interdenominational church, it seems to me that I can best use Kuyper if I situate him squarely in his confessional tradition, not merely transplant him into an ecumenical one. This is my first point: If we do not place him squarely within his confessional tradition, I'm afraid we will sanitize, deodorize and sterilize Kuyper.

Christians honoring Kuyper's legacy, face the same challenge the folks at APPLE face after Steve Job's death. Yesterday APPLE released the Iphone 5S under the slogan "Thinking Forward" and this pinpoints their challenge; The folks at Apple now have to think Steve Jobs thoughts after him. They must imagine his spirit acting on theirs. They need to intuit his imagination and recapture his visions for the future.

Jobs, like Kuyper, was a great man, but not a nice man; legendary and awe inspiring, while at times grievous and terrible. They have to think: what would Steve do? What would Abraham design?

In order to think Kuyper's thoughts after him, or to think like him, we must first understand Kuyper worked in the spirit of John Calvin. Calvinism was Kuyper's soul and his system, for him, the purest form of Christianity, the treasure of the past, the hope of the future. (117 The Calvinist concept of culture) Without a recommitment to rediscovering the roots of Kuyper's Sphere Sovereignty, as found in John Calvin, we will have nothing but our looted Presbyterian charms and reformed relics and evangelical curiosities.

Kuyper's life task was to develop Calvinism to fulfill the needs of nineteenth century Christianity. If we are going to navigate a pluralistic 21<sup>st</sup> century, we must return to the Calvinist reformers whom Kuyper celebrated. He subscribed body and soul to their teachers and worked ceaselessly to restore their authority in an age that had either forgotten them or contradicted their word.

E<sup>2</sup>, the iconic and symbolic center of Kuyper's moral vision, is the flower of a plant that has flourished in the fertile soil of confessional Calvinism.

In order to understand the challenge Kuyper presents to me, as a pastor, in order to rediscover the prophetic fire and the righteous indignation of Abraham Kuyper, we must dive deep in the sources of the tradition that generated a brother of such zeal and energy.

Secondly, I also think the question of Kuyper's piety and religious practice must be summoned out of obscurity. While there's much about Kuyper's faith and practice I do not yet fully understand or perhaps struggle to embrace, I agree with Dr. Mouw, who says "In this twenty first century, it is important to be especially clear about the connection between the every square inch of cultural engagement and a sense of nearness to God that must necessarily be grounded in the worshiping and nurturing life of the local church. (Culture, Church, and Civil society, Kuyper for a new century. The Princeton Seminary Bulletin, 2007

Thirdly, the American Church must rediscover the contours of a proper antithesis between faith and unbelief, worship and idolatry, between the market place of religious consumerism and the means of grace. In order to grapple with contemporary issues we must recapture the roots of Kuyper's vision and architectonic critique of modern society. Do we dare explore Kuyper's' deep indignation about the Church's world conformity, and what happens to once glorious reformed churches in the hands of the powers of our age?

Can we frequently quote Kuyper, a writer many have never read, without understanding the challenge that he presents? We must not hide and conceal his challenge. We may not tame his prophetic fire.

When Kuyper was ousted from the Dutch national reformed church he launched a different slogan, driven by a passionate antithesis. The slogan, 'It shall not be so among you'. "It shall not be so among you" doesn't of course have that "Just Do It" mystique of E<sup>2</sup>, and so it wasn't sticky enough and so, it never stuck. (page 126 It shall not be so among you. Abraham Kuyper a Centennial Reader)

Fourth and finally, what I take to heart, is Dr. Mouw's closing salvo on the last page of his book, we must explore the Calvinian roots of Kuyper's theology of the cross, his remnant theology, his pilgrim theology. Mouw says "Christians must care deeply about culture, and they must recognize that true cultural obedience to their Lord has to take place under the cross. (Mouw, 136) Then, once we, the church under the cross, the church of blood, sweat and tears, the oft reviled minority, rediscovers that not America, but heaven is our fatherland, only then will we be mobilized to great activism in this present world.