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TRANSLATING KUYPER

Until recently, many works of Abraham Kuyper, the renowned theologian, had never been translated into English.

That has changed, in part due to the work of Dordt Economics Professor Dr. Jan van Vliet and the support of Dr. Rimmer de Vries.

De Vries, a former chief economist and managing director of J.P. Morgan, is a passionate Kuyperian. In 2010, de Vries formed a translation team with a goal of translating 12 volumes of Kuyper's work by 2020. Each volume would have its own editor and introductory essays on the effects of Kuyper's thinking for our world today.



J. van Vliet

The team was comprised of scholars from the Netherlands, Canada, and the United States. Van Vliet was asked to serve as a translator, working on portions of the two volumes of Kuyper's *Om De Oude WereldZee*, ("Around the Sea of the Ancient World"). The segment was titled *On Islam*.

On Islam describes Kuyper's experience as a journalist traveling through the Mediterranean Basin, studying and commenting on the cultural expressions of Islam he observed in the neighboring countries. Although he wrote from an early 20th century colonial perspective, Kuyper observed those cultures with respect, considering, among other things, how the different branches of what he called the Semitic group of families—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—might work together to stem the tide of modernism in Europe. He admired the faithfulness with which they observed prayer, pilgrimage, and giving to the poor, but he noted that they missed the element of "palingenesis"—the spiritual rebirth of repentance and faith—that is essential to Christianity.

Van Vliet was born in The Hague, Netherlands, emigrated to Toronto at age five, and lived in a distinctively Dutch subculture within mainstream Canadian culture. His father, an accountant with an affinity for languages, had been a translator during World War II. Van Vliet's mother, who spoke Dutch, encouraged

her children to retain conversational knowledge of the language.

Still, van Vliet says his fluency in conversational Dutch did not quite prepare him for translating Kuyper, given Kuyper's tendency to use complicated, long-winded sentence structures.

"I found him quite inaccessible at times, and I'm a scholar," van Vliet says. "He writes in the prolix style of the old Puritans—if you can say something in 10 words, but there's 100 words in the language to use, you'll use them!"

Van Vliet used his own childhood knowledge of Dutch, combined with translation tools, ancient dictionaries, and lexicons. All told, translating *On Islam* took van Vliet three years. In 2016, the work was finally finished and, in 2018, his translation of *On Islam* was launched at the Acton Institute in Grand Rapids.

"From a philosophical angle, the works of Kuyper are crucial because Christian thinkers are seeking something solid in light of today's decline of belief in moral absolutes," says van Vliet. "Recognizing that science and progress—the central dogmas of the modernity project—do not always move us forward for the better, does not mean we abandon all. There is a better way to advance."

Van Vliet says Kuyper argued the same thing back in 1898. How does our worldview affect our understanding of reality or of different religions? How do we construct a social philosophy with which we can practice faithful cultural engagement from the perspective of the Scriptures?



"Kuyper has tremendous guideposts for us here," says van Vliet. "We're looking for a public theology that has foundational truth, in a world where truths are determined by one's own personal cultural narrative. In this postmodern hour there is great opportunity for effective cultural engagement." He believes Kuyper can provide some valuable insight for doing so.

Kuyper was not perfect. "His focus on modernism, his colonial and Eurocentric frame of mind, and his concern for the danger that Islam might pose for the Dutch possession of the Indonesian islands does not endear him to people out of his time and place," says van Vliet.

Yet, in focusing so much on Islam, Kuyper was prescient with respect to speaking to today's pluralistic reality. Kuyper's work on Islam, van Vliet believes, provides us with a social

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— Dr. Jan van Vliet, economics professor

philosophy of principled pluralism, anchored in the biblical principles of grace, hospitality, and embrace. For Kuyper, the faithfulness of a lived Christianity will bring about more fruit—conversions to Christianity—than traditional means of evangelism.

"Kuyper's personal curiosity regarding Islam sent him to the Mediterranean Basin in the first place. And we, for whom one of the greatest cultural and religious challenges is Islam, are benefactors of his insights."

KATE HENRECKSON