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Islam According to Journalist Abraham Kuyper¹



by Jan van Vliet

Introduction

Abraham Kuyper's journalistic-driven insights of early-twentieth-century Islam gleaned from his trip around the Mediterranean Sea treat us to yet another dimension of the mind of this "*reusachtige man*." He extensively chronicled and then pronounced on every detail—large or small, all memorable—of the life and times of the then contemporary Muslim. The result? A near-exhaustive, multifaceted, and carefully woven tapestry of the civilizations and cultures of the Mediterranean basin. It is a triangular area, bounded by Khartoum, Sudan, due north to Odessa, Ukraine, and southwest to

Dr. Jan van Vliet is Professor of Economics at Dordt College. This paper was presented at the 2016 Kuyper Conference "Religion and Journalism" at the Abraham Kuyper Center for Public Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey, April 15-16, 2016.

Tangier, Morocco. The tour took nine months.

Kuyper recorded his observations in his two-volume *Om De Oude Wereldzee*. As Kuyper says in his introduction, he brings nothing new to a geographical, ethnological or historical basis. But his journalistic reporting results in a powerful narrative, more an editorial, really, of a complicated landscape. It is much more than simply an autobiographically oriented tourist guide, although it is certainly that. The deeper one travels into Kuyper's diary, the more interesting, more profound, more challenging the journey. Kuyper as theologian, statesman, and intellectual informs Kuyper the journalist. He observes ways of life, patterns of thought, modes of behavior, intellectual development, artistic expression, architectural styles, forms of worship, political connections, religious orders, and morality. He comments on the religious and metaphorical meaning of the mosque almost as much as he does on the religious system of Islam itself. Kuyper's travelogue tastes very much like a pilgrimage, of sorts, a pilgrimage of a deeply religious and curious man, attempting somehow to come to terms with the reality and implications of the belief system of almost one fourth of the world's population. As I said, this is a complicated landscape.

One gets a sense, however, of a much greater concern, a higher persuasion, in back of this journey. It is the ultimacy of the Christian-theistic God and his coming kingdom. The former must receive due recognition and worship, while the latter must be faithfully pursued in obedience to the cultural mandate, prescribed in Genesis and played out through Scripture's narrative. And of this story we humans—all image bearers of God—are very

much a part. Our faithfulness is rewarded through becoming Christ-like in a greater and greater degree.

Understanding what Kuyper considers as the image of God helps us better interpret his Mediterranean editorial. Why should we feel such a deep concern over all of humanity and its pluriform story? We should because our marred image is being restored. And since it is being restored, humanity's flourishing is central to the story. This is how Herman Bavinck put it:

The human race in each of its parts and in its entirety is organically created in the image and likeness of God. Scripture expressly mentions that this creation of man in God's image must come to expression particularly in his dominion over all living beings and in the subjection to Him of the whole earth. Because man is the child or offspring of God, he is king of the earth. Being children of God and heirs of the world are two things... inseparably related to each other in the creation."²

Understanding humanity's image-bearing capacity broadly, then, we must labor, under the kingship of Jesus, to redeem the entire created order, all cultures and peoples. How do we do this among civilizations that worship other gods? We do it by answering the hows, the wheres, the whens, the whys, the whos, and the whats—the basic questions of any good reporting. This research includes, among other things, the world of politics, economics, education, and art—all self-consciously seen against Kuyper's own (and considered superior) European context of the day.

In addressing the broad question of the mystery and danger of Islam, Kuyper identifies the broader areas of religion, politics, and sociology in his "Introduction." He includes both the dominant ethos but also its reification (or concretization) in the institutional arrangements of the mosque, the government, and the social networks: the cultural gatekeepers, in other words. What can we learn from this century-old story? How can it help us today?

An Enigmatic Metaphysic

As I have articulated the neo-Calvinistic worldview that frames and informs all of Kuyper's thought, that of human flourishing in pursuit of the *summum bonum* of Christ's kingdom, the enigma of Islam is, in a word, its contradistinctive metaphysic. This worldview, as distinct from the Christian worldview, embraces irreconcilable antinomies. We will try to unpack the co-existence of some of these polar opposites.

What is Islam? It is the animating spirit of monotheism. It is the drive to holy war. It is the fanatical zeal of the faithful. It is the goal of world domination. It is the militant spirit. It is lust for the spoils of war. It is also protection of a woman's honor. It is scholarly attainment. It is glorious artistic expression. It is the emotional and reflective life. It is martyrdom.

But the larger question is this: how was it that Christianity folded, like a leaf in the wind, before the mystery of Islam? That is the "inexplicable problem" before us, says Kuyper. Why did the Christian Church succumb so easily? Why was all its hard work in the tradition of St. Paul, supplanting paganism around the Mediterranean with a warm, living, faith—and that amid varying degrees of persecution—done for nothing? How can it be that four centuries of work—by degrees—was essentially wiped away in less than a century?³

The solution to this puzzle, explains Kuyper, is found in both the state of the Christian church at the time and aggressive Islamic missions. When Islam appeared in Arabia in the 7th century, the Christian church had reached a state of near-ruin: its spiritual vitality had been enervated, and through its veins coursed not the blood of life but the deadness of the tomb. Its living faith had been robbed of its very essence by philosophical wrangling and scholastic dialectic. Arid dogmatic systems had replaced true living piety, and the ethos of the faith had been sabotaged by Greek and Eastern philosophical systems. In a word, four centuries of philosophical wrangling over Christ resulted in ripping apart that very Christ and his body, the Church. When Mohammed came on the scene,

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Christianity had a much different look from nearly half a millennium prior.⁴

But this transformation had really begun some centuries earlier, at that momentous occasion of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, maintains Kuyper, resulting in the conversion of Constantine. This conversion led to the worst possible state of affairs for the Church. While Caesaropapism brought persecution to an end, it also undermined the very nature of true Christianity. The Church and Rome were replaced by the Emperor and Constantinople. Church and state were inseparably welded together.⁵

As Kuyper surveys this historical regression of the Christian Church and the Church's interplay with an entirely new religion, Kuyper the theologian pauses, checks himself, inserts a quick comment to remind us of his orthodoxy, and then continues. This unfolding of events, he says, had been decreed by a sovereign God. This sad evolution of that wonderful Early Church represented God's punishment of the Church for her infidelity. As life was ebbing out of the Christian Church in the East, God was busy transferring the mantle of responsibility for its continuance to the West under the Germanic peoples. In fact, says Kuyper, the closer you come to the Strait of Gibraltar in your westerly travels around the Mediterranean, the more obvious this truth becomes. It is all Muslim. Even those who are the descendants of the earliest baptized Christians—those who are more “intimately Christian” than contemporary (early 20th-century) European society—worship Allah and his prophet. In fact, many of those Christian forebears of these now-Muslims were martyred for the Christian faith. The disappearance of the historic Christian Church was complete.⁶

Why does Islam attract?

Religion

Kuyper seeks to discover the “magic” with which Mohammed brought about this untold period in world history and why he achieved it in such a short period of time. Mohammed (570–632) was a visionary and spiritual force, very amenable to ecstatic expression. This tendency was behind the origins and maintenance of the institution he created, the religion of Islam. He held to one thing as the only object of worship, and that without a trace

of compromise: the God of Abraham,⁷ Allah, the All-Merciful and All-Compassionate. Mohammed considered Islam an entire rule of life, not just an add-on, not something buried within. He believed that the all-encompassing supremacy of Allah's omnipotence stretches, as a net, over all of human existence, all aspects of life—personal and domestic, social and political. Monotheism meant much more than simply the claim that there were no other gods but Allah: the entire universe itself was a mighty timepiece for which Allah had designed the plan, which he had masterfully assembled, and which he had set in motion to eventually terminate at a pre-arranged time.⁸

Kuyper observes that this religion—Islam—was not new to Mohammed since Allah's law and will had determined life's existence and direction in the past, did so in the present, and would continue to do so in the future. The religion he had introduced was not only not new, but it was also not simply a syncretistic blending of multiple existing religions. All along, Allah had been revealing both his will and his kingdom rule to humanity. In order to unveil fully the mystery of Allah's kingdom rule, Allah had provided a gradual, ongoing, and progressive revelation.⁹

Through the ages the prophets had been the means by which Allah had disclosed his mysteries. A small number of these were particularly prominent: Adam, Noah, and Shem; then Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. These all shared a zeal for monotheism and faithfully proclaimed the glory of Allah. Their successive appearance was a concatenation, as it were, of the continual revelation of Allah through history. Until Mohammed, Jesus stood as the final and the highest revelation, but only one of many and alike in rank to Moses and his predecessors. But Allah's revelation was not consummated with Jesus. Did not the gospels themselves speak of an impending Comforter after him? This promise has now been fulfilled in Mohammed, himself the final revelation of Allah. The historical march begun with Adam—or Abraham if you wish—was one continuous, unitary process to which Mohammed was the grand finale. Thus all of faith, for the Muslim, comes down to two things: first, the confession that Allah governs all things, and second, that Allah gave his full and final revelation

in Mohammed.¹⁰

A body of writing was developed to complete the revelation: the establishment of law and statue. Each single aspect of the life of his true worshippers had to be governed by Allah, hence the strict nomism (legalism) that permeated all of Islam like yeast. Kuyper repeatedly returns to this concept of nomism. This conviction explains both the pride of the Muslim and the urgent drive to holy war, he says. To the Muslim, you are either for or against Allah. Only those on the side of Allah and his Prophet are authentic human beings. And because Allah governs all things, this earth represents the dominion of only his true worshippers. All haters of Allah covet his honor and are inimical to his established order. And from this belief comes the command to holy war.

When Canaan was invaded by Moses, he brought a *national* religion. But Mohammed held that Islam was the *absolute* religion, the *world* religion, *the only* religion. These are the characteristics that explain the supremacy of Islam and the extreme and strict idea of holy war as the means through which Islam pursues mastery of the entire world.¹¹

This jihad, i.e., the holy war against the infidel, is taught in the Koran and not as an option: it is a responsibility flowing directly from the principle of absolute, legalistic monotheism.¹² This legalistic, strictly rules-bound character of Islam gives it its darker, shadowy side, demonstrating the entire absence of spiritual depth. Islam's moral norm, while a fractional improvement over what existed in Arabia when Mohammed came upon the scene, asserts Kuyper, is of a fundamentally low standard and does not even adhere to the literal precepts of the Koran itself. Mohammed's own immorality severed this link. *With no spiritual transformation come low ethical standards.*¹³

Kuyper provides this example of Muslim preaching, which, in the main, is delivered in huge spaces in mosques in formal oratorical style. But it is also done more informally, in small venues with 150-200 people, and then is also captivating and charismatic. Of such preaching he recalls,

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It was in the Hagia Sophia that I attended just such an address and was aided by my interpreter. His audience listened so closely that I too became extremely interested in what he said:

“Dear friends,’ he began, ‘The soul is your most prized possession. But the soul is something so mysterious that you have almost no understanding of it. So you need to create an image of the egg. Occasionally a small dark spot will appear in the egg white, and, if you do nothing about this, it will spread and soon spoil the entire egg. No one will want it and

any cook would be glad to get it out of his kitchen. But if you are diligent, and immediately remove that dark spot it will remain delicious and anyone would happily eat it. Now that is how it is with your soul. A black spot sometimes appears. This spot is sin and if you swiftly and attentively excise that dark

spot from your soul it will remain pure. Should you then die your soul will joyfully be carried through the ports of paradise. But ignoring that dark spot ensures the soul's deterioration and it won't be long before this decayed soul resembles that rotten egg. Upon death, nobody in paradise will be interested in having you but they will shout, as with one voice: Get out of here! Scram!’

Now of course he did not literally put it like this. I can only summarize the content as my interpreter communicated it to me. But it does speak for the genre and explains its fascination. There is *little depth*, but it captivates and is lively. That the message is not delivered in the style of a sermon and from a pulpit but rather in more story-like fashion, and within a small circle, enhances the effect. Even soldiers that were present hung on the speaker's every word and the ambience is so cozy that the odd person would occasionally pose a question or raise an objection that would be answered on the spot. The listening public is not passive but is rather involved in this teaching exercise.¹⁴

While preaching conducted in this fashion, if not the norm, represents commendable two-way discourse, Kuyper explores the lack of emphasis on spiritual transformation in Islamic thought. The

central Christian teaching of the contrast between the old and the new, or the concept of individual transformation and “rebirth”—*palingenesis*—is utterly foreign to Islam. But this absence has not prevented the regular appearance of revivals, urging for a return to a more scrupulous view of life. Some branches of Islam (e.g., the Wahhabis) pursued these ends, and it is commonly known that almost all Mahdi movements have had a similar program.¹⁵ More on the Mahdi in a moment.

But the value of these mystical movements, claims Kuyper, was itself limited by the Koran’s moral standard. Christianity is constructed on the three pillars of “faith, hope and love,” or, taken organically, rebirth, faith, and sanctification (recall, *palingenesis*). In Islam, by contrast, the corresponding pillars upon which the edifice of religion rests are faith in Allah and his prophet, prayer, fasting in Ramadan, almsgiving, and pilgrimage to Mecca. This juxtaposition profoundly demonstrates the singularly external character, says Kuyper, that is at the root of its own disfigurement. Mohammed’s expectation for the ideal afterlife betrays the same lack of moral prominence, since the reward is sensuously defined. Paradise is portrayed with sensuous, allegorical symbols.¹⁶

Mystic elements suffuse this religion, which is so outwardly oriented and has no life-giving inner spirit. Mysticism, says Kuyper, is the “indispensable stuffing of every legalistic religion.”¹⁷ But it has only minority appeal since mysticism requires a uniquely oriented and idiosyncratic state of mind. That is why the Koran doesn’t mention it; it addresses itself to the nomist majority. Kuyper attributes the enduring spiritual power of Islam to the various types of mystical expressions over the ages and across different forms of Islam.¹⁸

Political

Because Islam dictates all of life, it is difficult to separate the religious from the political dimensions. They are inseparably intertwined, as Kuyper explains from the panorama stretching before him as he approaches Constantinople:

Coming from Sevastopol, I cruised into the Bosphorus Strait from the Black Sea. The first sight to break into view was the looming and faintly curved shape of the border of Asia. But in the very next

moment this view was almost lost in the shadow of the headland of the European continent, claiming, as it were, recognition of its superiority over its eastern sister. At this confluence of these two continents, Europe looms, fully conscious of its much richer beauty, a beauty greatly enhanced by its possession of the singularly-magnificent Byzantium. This one glance at Asia and Europe simultaneously, so close together yet so divided by the depths of the Bosphorus Strait, calls to mind not only history itself but indeed the very design of history. The march of life through history has moved towards Europe from Asia as steadily as a tidal wave. These two powers have struggled through the ages for world domination. And while Europe has prevailed, it remains that the three powerful Asian religions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity govern the spiritual life in both continents. For Africa is an appendix to Asia while the United States and Australia have their roots in Europe. Thus Asia and Europe remain at the very center of human development on our planet.... [It] is on the Bosphorus Strait, that both the contradiction and the unity of these continents speaks simultaneously. Here they are joined simultaneously in unity and in opposition, retaining all the while their own individual essence....¹⁹

Geo-political realities conflate with religious design and propagation.

That already mentioned Caesaropapism—that fusion of church and state—which brought Christianity to its knees, is the very hallmark of Islam. All political means—the entire power of the state—will be employed, forcibly if need be, to bring about Islamic world domination. Kuyper judges that while the religious (note: not “spiritual”) dominance of Islam is as strong as ever, the political might of Islam has been broken by European ascendancy. But this will not stop Islam from always pursuing the ideal of world domination. As we look at the political machinations of Islam over history through Kuyper’s journalistic lens, this drive to world domination is facilitated only by equal faith in the power of arms and military might. This philosophy lies behind jihad. The worst possible combination for the forcible progression of a religion is that of fanaticism and military might. The earnestness of Islam can be seen in many places throughout Kuyper’s observations where he identifies this force in preaching and teaching,²⁰ particu-

larly when we observe the Mahdi phenomenon.

The title Mahdi is an Arabic designation for the “divinely guided one.” This individual is a messianic deliverer in Islamic eschatology who will fill the earth with justice and equity, restore true religion, and usher in a short golden age (somewhere from seven to nine years). This is expected to take place before the end of the world, itself ushered in by the Day of Resurrection and coinciding with the return of Jesus Christ, who will aid him in his work. The idea of a Mahdi is not found in the Koran, although he is mentioned in the “hadith” (later commentaries on the Koran). Sunni theologians question Mahdist beliefs, while these convictions form a necessary part of Shiite doctrine. The Mahdi is seen as a restorer of the political power and religious purity of Islam, and social revolutionaries in Islamic society, particularly in North Africa, often lay claim to this title.²¹ Muslims are ordered to obey the ten commandments, found in the Koran, which “come to you from God and his Mahdi.”²² The latter are the enforcers of these commandments and do so by violence. Says Kuyper, “The Mahdi was a voluptuary, who descended into the depths of sensuality, not proscribed by the Koran.... Nothing in his religion opposes this. The Mahdi came to power through rivers of blood. Wielding the sword was not only permitted by his religion; it was imposed as a duty.”²³

Kuyper then juxtaposes the teaching of the Mahdi with the transcendence of Christianity, where the commandments are lifted to a new, grand, and spiritual level. Kuyper paraphrases Jesus’ commentary, as it were, on the Decalogue, found in the Sermon on the Mount:²⁴ “Whoever looks at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her in his heart.” Again, “My kingdom is not of this world; otherwise my servants would have fought for me. Whoever strikes with the sword shall perish by the sword.”²⁵ This antithesis between Gospel and Koran precludes almost any comparison out of hand.²⁶ And that, asserts Kuyper, is the experience and underlying dominating spirit of Islam.²⁷

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Sociological

Abraham Kuyper’s observations on the sociological fabric of Islam I will briefly illustrate by exploring views on women, toleration, scholarship, high society, and artistic/architectural endeavor.

First, women were considered a field to be ploughed for pleasure yet an honor to be jealously defended. Kuyper discovered Islam as a religion exclusively for men, a faith from which women were entirely excluded. In France, he said, one observes

the Christian churches almost exclusively visited by women; under Islam women barely take part in worship. The contributions which the woman, with her better developed social life, with her tenderness and warmth,

could make towards the faith and a higher culture are entirely absent.²⁸ Referencing his experience in Constantinople, he noted that women were little involved in public religious life. Even the mosque relegated them to small spaces. This is the precise opposite, he observed, to the place of women in the Christian world. In the Netherlands, women generally outnumbered men. This male domination, says Kuyper, is undoubtedly an advantage for Islam: A nation in which males from all walks of life are bound to its religious practices fares extraordinarily better than a nation whose religion is more withdrawn from public life and left to the women. He notes that with the absence of song, music, and mystical ceremonies or sacraments, Islam had little sense of feeling. The many body movements required by prayer were practiced more by men than by women. It was unlikely that women would return to religious involvement, he concluded, since they found religion unappealing. Worship in the mosque catered to the man, since by its very organization it almost exclusively privileged the man as head in the mosque and as the intrepid warrior in battle for Allah.²⁹

In Islam the female was merely incidental, no more than a footnote to the male. Mohammed maintained that the woman is a field that a man ploughs for pleasure. It is doubted whether women even had a future after death. Consigning women to such base status was a devastating spiritual and

social blunder. And the complicity of Mohammed, in this regard, was all the more damnable since Mohammed “once knew Christianity and the high esteem in which it holds women.”³⁰

Because sons were desired, many girls were smothered in the harem, something that went relatively unnoticed until recently, Kuyper noted. He concluded that this debasement of the female had led to polygamy, “a situation that nourishes all unrighteousness.” Young girls were often married off at 8 and 9 years of age. Practically nobody was unmarried, but divorce was easy. One even found women under thirty who had been legally separated already three or four times; it was equally common that they later married one of their previous husbands. The world of the harem was very central in the world of Islam, and in its own unique way, had influenced socio-political affairs. There was a flourishing slave trade in young girls, with a good market in Constantinople. In the harems of high notables, however, the women were part of a completely modernized civilization. They were Parisian through and through, having entirely abandoned their eastern essence. On these religiously indifferent women, Islam had lost the last of its influence.³¹

Yet Kuyper’s experience in Algeria was entirely different. He noted that the system of rule among both the Berbers and the Greeks was the precise opposite of early 20th-century state-level organization. The Berber village was exclusively a military convention established to provide a mutual confederacy against an outside enemy. The singular code by which Berber communities lived was that of “horma”—the honor of the city. This transcended the honor of the family, which in turn was above individual honor. This entire conception was reminiscent of the Greek political structure, which also set the well-being of the *polis* or community in the foreground. Conflict with other communities compromised the city’s horma and weakened it. Thus, retribution was swift. A crime committed by outsiders against someone in the village imposed the duty of vengeance on the entire village. The horror was not that this or that woman was raped, or this or that man was murdered, but rather that someone had dared assault a resident of this great town. It was not overly terrible that someone had been killed; rather, what cried for vengeance was the fact

that a village resident had been singled out for attack. And revenge was wreaked not only upon the guilty party, but upon the entire village to which the individual belonged.³²

Kuyper cites an example of the behavioral code of a particular village that reads, “When a woman insults a man, she pays one reaal;” but, “when a man insults a woman, he will pay two reaal.... If a woman of the village is raped, or a man from the village killed, or a herd of cattle from the village is stolen, and the village declares war in defense of its honor, then whoever refuses to join the fight pays a fine of 50 reaal.” Citizens’ full participation in the patriotic life of their city was demanded, and the violation of the honor of the city was deeply felt by all citizens.³³

The birth of a girl was met with disappointment, while the entire village exalted at the birth of a boy since a male holds more promise for the defense of the honor of the village. But the honor of a woman was always defended. To touch a woman, even in the least indecent fashion, brought severe punishment, and to engage a woman in conversation that was in the slightest sense dishonorable incurred heavy fines. In this regard, the Code in these villages established particularly high standards; for example, if incest of any sort was discovered, the guilty party was placed in the center of the public market, surrounded by all the townspeople—each with a stone in hand—and stoned. Murder was punished much less severely than that which is seen to violate the proper system of morals. A person who committed murder was fined 125 francs, while one who kissed a woman or young girl in public paid 250 francs. Adultery, which was extremely rare, carried the heaviest punishment. The fine for raping a girl was one hundred douros (one douro = five francs), and no village had any tolerance for matchmaking. The women did not wear a veil, but they were heavily made up, and to be tattooed was considered an honor.³⁴

When needed, women were allowed to join active combat during periods of war. Infanticide or expulsion was practically non-existent among these people. The spiritual orders had developed well here, and even the women were included as community leaders (i.e., “Moquadem”). Algerians were of a musical constitution and possessed a rich na-

tional treasure of songs which upheld the spirit of the people. In short, concludes Kuyper, when seen from a moral perspective, their social life functioned at a very high level, but this is almost exclusively due to the idea of honor.³⁵

Second, Christians were treated with both tolerance and intolerance. Kuyper notes that moderate Islam treated Christians with a “cooperative spirit” and a “happy kind of tolerance because of economic motivation.” When Spain underwent substantial economic development, Kuyper observed what he called a “uniquely Eastern glow” that accompanied this development. This glow was a curious type of tolerance, a state of affairs driven by economics. Since Christians paid a poll- or head-tax, there was no need to persecute them. A general tolerance was the rule. Economics consigned religious differences to the background. In Damascus it had been shown that caliphs had been far from strict in their teaching. This was also true in Cordoba, which was ruled by moderates. And Christians did not oppose this state of affairs. The social elites intermixed; they were a tightly-knit group, moving in the rarefied circles of wealth, profit, and learning. They even inter-married—Christian, Jew, and Muslim. Visiting the synagogue in Toledo was already a long-established habit, even considered quite elegant among the Christian upper classes. Kuyper noted that an “Enlightenment-spirit” reigned, and Christians thanked both the Muslim conquerors, as well as the Jews, for the distinct and rich period of economic blossoming over which they presided. In fact, conversion to Islam was recognized, with some sadness, as “emptying the public purse.”³⁶

But a more rigorous Islam practiced social oppression, again “economically motivated,” says Kuyper.³⁷ He explains that by Islamic law, Christians in a militarily occupied country were faced with one of three options: convert, pay the head tax and be tolerated, or die by the sword. Option two Kuyper considered an act of submission in itself. Yet Christians choosing this option received toleration of sorts. Regardless of the choice,

the sole focus of this toleration was to ostracize the foreigner.³⁸ For example, when Jerusalem fell to the Muslim leader Omar, the bill of surrender read as follows:

Christians [are] free to worship in their churches and chapels on condition that any Muslim [can] be present at any time, day and night. [Christians’] worship service will never spill out into the street. [They] will never allow their children to nose around in the Koran. [They] will not evangelize. [They] will prevent no one from becoming Muslim. [In] their encounters with Muslims, the latter will always be accorded the higher honor. [Christians] will abstain from dressing as a Muslim [and] will never write in Arabic, the glorious language of Islam. [They] will never accept Muslim names. [They] will never ride on large saddles, nor ever bear arms. [They] will shave their beards and never fix a cross to their churches. [Their] clocks will never peal. [They] will bury their dead without external display. [They] will never receive a slave owned by a Muslim, on their property. [They] will never peek into Muslim homes never raise a hand against a Muslim.³⁹

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If this social pressure destroyed your life and the prospects of your children, and if all that Islam required was confession of Allah, however loose that might be understood, it was easy to convert. “We admire,” says Kuyper, “the many families who preferred a life of grievous humiliation over denial of the Christ.”⁴⁰ But this was rare, for depth of faith was precisely what the Christian masses lacked. In all Muslim-occupied territory, therefore, the majority gradually crossed over. With declining numbers of Christian families in the towns and villages, opposition by the remaining became much more difficult. Seeing others deny the faith somehow reduced the sinfulness of one’s own betrayal of Christ. And so, finally, with few exceptions, the people in nearly all the countries of Asia and Africa converted to Islam.⁴¹

Third, intellectual accomplishments moved from potency to impotence. Kuyper presents the

intellectual accomplishments of Islam through pre-modern history in glowing terms. The later 16th-century stagnation resulted from the entry of a particularly legalistic brand of Islam. Kuyper notes that initially Islam elevated all intellectual life. Arabic scholarship and science outstripped that of Asia and Africa for sure, but also of Europe. Governing each aspect of life included the life of the mind. Religious, political, legal, military, social—all required systematization. So an appeal was made to the Koran for guidance in these matters. This appeal led to disagreement, and the resulting process of reconciliation of these differences—delving into the deeper principles of epistemology and Greek philosophy—stimulated the desire for study. Brilliant minds of the first order vied for the highest laurels. Thus, while Christian Europe had barely scratched the surface of the world of scholarship, advanced scholarly attainment flourished for centuries in the world of Islam.⁴²

From his travels through Egypt, Kuyper comments at length about the institutional center of Islamic scholarship, the university of Al-Azhar in Cairo, where the humanities, theology, and jurisprudence were taught. Even astronomy, mathematics, and the natural sciences received attention.

But with the invasion of the Turks in the middle of the 16th century, this initial period of intellectual flourishing terminated. Scholarly thought came to an end, differing opinions disappeared, and every field of study came to be ruled by *communis opinio*—the maintenance of tradition. Henceforth no other study would be required than the advocacy of the already discovered and the maintenance of “naked, conservative” tradition, which it has maintained ever since. The resulting conservative character of the University of Al-Azhar had become, notes Kuyper, a substantial force in the preservation of Islam. This is even more so now (early 1900s), he says, than it was during the 17th and 18th centuries.⁴³

Kuyper notes that religion and scholarship were particularly pre-eminent in Morocco, dominating life in Fez, the then capital of Morocco and still considered today (21st century) as the cultural capital. In elaborate detail he discusses the nature of Fez as the intellectual center, focusing particularly on the vast library resources dating to 1285. Koranic

teaching, prayer, and the guild system likewise characterized Fez as an environment of learning. He reminds the reader that the founding prayer of the city was the following: “O Allah let this city represent a seat of knowledge and wisdom as long as it will stand, that your holy book will always be honored.”⁴⁴

Fourth, high society was characterized by a sophisticated patriarchy. The Fazi, as a native of Fez was called, was to Morocco what a Parisian was to France—a more sophisticated, and refined individual, notes Kuyper. The etiquette in social intercourse was well tended to, and all aspects of life were “draped” with ceremonial courtesy. All were highly literate, an attribute that made conversation “nobler.” It could, at times, transcend the social intercourse of the typical European, reflecting, as it did, the peculiar, civilized style of the Moors. Even the bathroom, notes Kuyper, was carefully monitored. Tattooing was unacceptable; on the contrary, it was very fashionable to be unmarked. Kuyper mentions twenty large bathhouses on school property where gentlemen bathed in the morning and ladies at night. Moreover, a highly developed sense of beneficence prevailed: the poor received soup in the morning, some meat in the afternoon, and some sort of couscous in the evening. The sick were provided for in a similar fashion. Every afternoon music wafted through the psychiatric hospital to bring peace to the patients’ spirits. A fund had even been established, to make the sleepless nights more pleasant for the patients through music.⁴⁵

Household life was ruled by a strong patriarchal tone. As a rule, married children began their lives together in the parental home. Polygamy was dying, and the lifestyle of the harem was practically unknown there; in the afternoon—we would say at the five o’clock tea—the entire family gathered together. A Christian visitor who lived among them for six months recalled his most agreeable time there, with wonderful families, in very fine houses, being served very good dinners, with numerous guests present. He noted that music brings great joy to life in Fez. Fez even had schools for girls.⁴⁶

Fifth, artistic/architectural endeavors were internally contradictory. Kuyper observes that he does not share the “almost fanatical admiration for Moorish art” since it was not authentically native.

It was borrowed from others. This is the opinion of experts, he says. Not that Arabic art can't be beautifully reconstructed, but the creative spirit is just not there. Arabs' artists were particularly good at imitating and idealizing nature in their art, most notably in their carpets.⁴⁷

Observing artistic and architectural expression in Spain, Kuyper recounts how Islam never encouraged the visual arts nor lent it any intrinsic inspiration.⁴⁸ Even funerary monuments in what was often considered the epicenter of Islam of the day—Constantinople—lacked originality.⁴⁹ Moreover, Eastern poetry, he claims, was rich and delightful, but its music had long left much to be desired.⁵⁰ In fact, the only area where the Arabs did excel was in architecture and decoration, even if almost nothing, aside from the ornamentals, is of authentic Arabic origin. He points out that most of the architecture of Constantinople, Asia Minor, and Syria came predominantly from the Byzantine world, while that of Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco was of Coptic (Egyptian Christian) provenance. The Umayyad period was often considered the formative period in Islamic art. But even the Umayyad in Damascus, explains Kuyper, mimicked the style of Cairo, while Baghdad imitated Damascus.⁵¹

Kuyper judges Cordoban architecture to be little more than a flourishing of the Baghdad revival. It was primarily Christian architects to whom the Arabs turned for help even before the construction of their mosques. Most of their columns were salvaged from antique buildings and Christian churches and then blended into their mosques without a view to careful selection or harmony. The pointed arch they took over from the Copts. The eggshaped dome had similar origin; even the polygon-like arabesques were well known by the Copts in Egypt, long before the Arabs adopted them.⁵²

Does this mean that in using already existing forms, the Arabs brought little of their own thought to the architectural enterprise? In part, yes. This premise certainly applies to mosques at Constantinople and elsewhere, which are merely copies of the Hagia Sophia, which is of course of

Christian provenance. The same cannot be said, however, of the authentic Arabic mosque, which shows a completely different construction and type, and very definitely conveys a character of its own.⁵³

Yet as such, these constructs demonstrated to Kuyper, an almost entire absence of artistic merit. Arabs were strangers to real architecture, claims Kuyper, exhausting all their strength in the world of the decorative and in the pursuit of impressions on the feelings and affections. He considered them to be "of dreamy and pensive disposition, and everything has symbolic significance for them."⁵⁴

One must be disabused of the notion that this art would have led to the invention of their own native architecture; Kuyper felt that Arabic creations lacked all originality in construction.

Yet he also felt that if one attends only to the wondrous manner in which they dressed and adorned bare frame constructs, then there was no higher and more soul-penetrating effect imaginable than that Arabic creation.⁵⁵

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complimentary, reflective,
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and even angry.

Closing Observations

Practically speaking, Kuyper's greater concern was for God's glory to be evident in the well-being and flourishing of humanity and the redemption of all peoples and God's world. This concern explains his moods as he travels, observes, and records. He was alternatively awestruck, complimentary, reflective, self-critical, melancholic, and even angry. Even as he placed the people of the Mediterranean basin under his gaze, a gaze informed by his European narrative and his Dutch situatedness, Europe and specifically the Netherlands felt the sting of his rebuttal and corrective as well. Human flourishing is incomplete if not also multicultural, pluralistic, and inclusive of all people groups. The biblical imperative presupposes this pluralism.

I have not mentioned his diary of travels through Israel. I consider this to be of an entirely different order at many levels. Kuyper judges Israel to be both the glory and embarrassment of Christianity, and I encourage you to spend time with this chapter in *On Islam* when it is released.

Finally, the reader is reminded that this paper

aims to introduce Kuyper's early 20th century interactions with Islam to an English-speaking audience. As such, it is deliberately uncritical in spirit and scope. The reader will have noticed many places that beg for critical engagement and commentary. This summary, then, enumerates two things: a reminder, in summary form, of the key emphases running throughout the two-volume diary of the differences between Islam (according to Kuyper) and Christian theism, and a few of my own observations regarding topics that should most certainly receive critical scholarly engagement. In this connection I have chosen what I consider to be five of the most obvious areas requiring immediate further critical engagement.

(1) The Transcendence and Immanence of God

- Allah is transcendent only—the Christian-theistic God is immanent as well.
- Allah is an unknowable God—the Christian-theistic God is perfectly knowable (“whoever has seen me has seen the Father,” said Jesus).
- Allah is a demanding God—the Christian God condescends to his created children, emphasizing the Fatherhood of God and his intimacy with humanity in Jesus Christ.
- Allah is a remote God: in Islam the Muslim pursues Allah to please him through works—in Christianity God pursues his people in grace.
- Nomism means the letter of the law rules; by contrast, in Christianity, the spirit of the law is more important, explicit in New Testament revelation.
- Allah has compassion but lacks holiness—misses the ideal of “Sacred Love.” Allah cannot be approached as “abba” (“daddy”).

(2) Spiritual transformation (*palingenesis*)

- Christian faith, hope, and love (rebirth, faith, sanctification) is juxtaposed with the works-righteousness of Islam: faith in Allah and his prophet, prayer, fasting in Ramadan, almsgiving, and pilgrimage to Mecca.

(3) The Nature of the Kingdom

- In its drive for world domination of a blended religious-political reality, the nature of Islam's kingdom is this-worldly; the nature of the kingdom of Christ is other-worldly: “my kingdom is not of this world,” said Jesus.
- The afterlife involves a conflation of political and religious dimensions.
- Fundamentalism and fanaticism are fused with, presuppose, in fact, the power of arms and military superiority.
- Islam's drive is for independence and mastery. Kuyper observes that despite the tremendous economic benefits and “unprecedented prosperity” which English and European domination have conferred (in the areas of agriculture, irrigation, transportation networks, administration, industrial enterprise, and culture), popular Muslim opinion will not be swayed: “All Muslims will together bless the day when we withdraw [as imperial powers], and they will seize every opportunity to make this happen.”⁵⁶

(4) Christian Missionary Zeal

Scripture teaches us to be always promoting the cause of Christianity among believers and to unbelievers. Yet Kuyper seems to have a rather pessimistic view of the success of such biblical injunctions. He has a dim view of Christian missionary success to Islam: “I have as little faith in the Christian conquest of Islam as I do in Western technical and economic superiority. Even now Islam is busy developing a more advanced culture in the Indian sub-continent [South Asia] on par with the highest cultural development of Christian Europe. It is very hard to make sense of this reality.”⁵⁷

But in setting the basics of Christianity over against those of Islam, the Apostle Paul provides a wonderful framework for evangelizing to unbelievers and their “Unknown God.” This pattern appears in the following five-point sermon found in his address delivered in the Areopagus in Athens, in the middle of the first century CE, and recorded in the book of Acts of the Christian scriptures, chapter 17, verses 16-34:

- The ignorance of pagan worship centering on the “unknown god” (vv 23-24)
- The Christian God as object of worship (vv 25-26)
- God’s relationship to humanity (vv 26-27)
- Idolatry and false worship (vv 28-29)
- Concluding thoughts—end the ignorance (vv 30-31)

Nowhere is Paul discouraged by lack of missionary success.

(5) Relevance for Today

Having read the two-volume journal of Abraham Kuyper’s early 20th century trip through the Mediterranean basin, the reader will be struck by a number of historical realities that both have taken place already in world history and that are even now unfolding here in the west. In many areas other than spiritual and theological, Kuyper was remarkably prescient. I present a few of these observations in the following summary form:

- Indulging Muslim sensibilities was occurring already in Christian-Islam relations at the height of imperial power: England in Egypt, and in Africa, and in South Asia; France in Tunisia, for example.⁵⁸
- Differential treatment of a people group is not a new thing. Consider the Japanese internment in the first half of the 20th century—both as entrenched in legislation and actualized in physical removal.⁵⁹
- Recent events in Europe (Brussels) and political posturing in the United States, particularly by those leading the race for the Republican party nomination, involve discussions of a wall of separation and of prejudicial immigration policies.⁶⁰
- Economic domination by China and Japan unfolded through the 20th century pretty much as foretold by Kuyper, and the Chinese economic miracle continues today.⁶¹

Endnotes

1. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the annual conference of the Abraham Kuyper Center for Public Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, April 15, 2016, Princeton, New Jersey. Parts of the text

come in Kuyper’s own words. This article could be considered part I of a series of articles being prepared critically assessing varying aspects of Abraham Kuyper’s trip through the Levant and recorded journalism style in his two-volume *Om De Oude Wereldzee*. Currently in preparation for publication is Part II entitled “Christian Theism and Islam—According-to-Kuyper: the Metaphysical Architecture” and delivered at the Association for Reformational Philosophy 2016 Conference, convening at the Leaven Center for Christian Studies, Leuven, Belgium, August 15-19 2016.

2. Herman Bavinck, “The Origin, Essence, and Purpose of Man,” at https://www.the-highway.com/origin_Bavinck.html; retrieved 7/24/2017.
3. Abraham Kuyper, *Om De Oude Wereldzee*, vol. II (Amsterdam: Van Holkema & Warendorf, n.d. [1908]), 2; hereafter, *OOWZ-II*.
4. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 16-17.
5. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 14.
6. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 16.
7. Kuyper uses the Arabic word “hanif,” which is an Arabic designation for true monotheists (especially Abraham) who were not Jews, Christians, or worshipers of idols. The word appears to come from Syriac for “heathen,” thus designating a Hellenized person of culture. There is no evidence that a true hanif cult existed in pre-Islamic Arabia, but there were certain individuals who, having repudiated the old gods, prepared the way for Islam but embraced neither Judaism nor Christianity (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/hanif>; retrieved 7/24/2017).
8. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 3-4; notice the interesting cosmogonic parallel here with William Paley’s (ca 1802) teleological argument for the existence of God.
9. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 4.
10. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 4-5.
11. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 5-6.
12. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 7. He continues: “The saints must always be prepared for war. The harsh and unrelenting detailed instructions are found in the ninth Surah, verse 5: “...Slay the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them. If they repent and take to prayer, and render the alms levy, allow them to go their way. Allah is merciful and compassionate. ...To show either passive or active opposition to Allah is the greatest and, ultimately, the sole crime. And all who call upon Allah have the duty to break this resistance and bring this shocking crime to justice.”
13. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 8-11.
14. Abraham Kuyper, recalling his experience in

Constantinople and recorded in his *Om De Oude Wereldzee*, vol. I (Amsterdam: Van Holkema & Warendorf, n.d. [1907]), 348-49; hereafter *OOWZ-I*.

15. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 9.
16. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 9-10.
17. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 10.
18. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 10-11.
19. Kuyper *OOWZ-I*, 325-26. He continues: "...For Africa is an appendix to Asia while the United States and Australia have their roots in Europe. Thus Asia and Europe remain at the very center of human development on our planet. ...But it is on the Bosphorus that both the contradiction and the unity of these continents speaks simultaneously. Here they are joined, retaining all the while their own individual essence. Both the history of human life and the design of that history are found here, typified in an unparalleled natural beauty amidst an overwhelming wealth of human art" (op. cit., 326).
20. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 29-31.
21. From <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mahdi>; retrieved 7/24/2017.
22. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 161.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid. Kuyper continues: "it was precisely this impure character of Mahdism, with its curious blend of a fanatical piety, an unrestricted sensuality, a plundering military spirit, and an obsession with ridding itself of the Egyptian yoke, which decided the fate of Sudan in the 1880s. With each new victory achieved by the Mahdi, not only did his fame climb but so did faith in his divine mission." Kuyper narrates the sad instance of the late 19th century Sudan War when tens of thousands lost their lives when a self-proclaimed Mahdi turned a political war into a religious Jihad.

The Mahdist Revolution was an Islamic revolt against the Egyptian government in the Sudan when an incipient political movement was transformed into a fundamentally religious one through the Mahdi's urging jihad or "holy war" against imperial Egypt. More at <http://www.blackpast.org/gah/Mahdist-revolution-1881-1898#sthash.bNeVAHJh.dpuf>; retrieved 7/24/2017.
27. This conflation of church and state is the history of Islam. Kuyper ends his travelogue on this note: that while the classical and political element came to Europe from Greece and Rome, it has deeply embedded in it a Semitic influence. The three world religions bear the stamp of this Semitic root. "The clash of interests dominated by the Atlantic Ocean is immense. Moreover, the

significance of the struggle emerging in the Pacific is becoming increasingly more robust. Yet in keeping with a pattern established through a long history, the Gordian Knot of international relations has come to rest in the Mediterranean. This is no mystery to England. After having taken root at Gibraltar, occupied Malta, and taken possession of Cyprus, it made itself the de facto ruler of Egypt. But it continues to maintain a powerful fleet in the Mediterranean in its ongoing search for the clue to political calm in the area" (*OOWZ-II*, 511).

28. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 49-51.
29. Kuyper, *OOWZ-I*, 356-57.
30. Ibid.
31. Kuyper, *OOWZ-I*, 357-60.
32. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 344-47.
33. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 345-49.
34. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 348.
35. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 348-49.
36. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 427-28.
37. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 20-22.
38. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 18-23.
39. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 20-21.

In Egypt these conditions were even worse: Christians were always obliged to wear a wooden block weighing a few pounds around the neck, while wearing prescribed, dark, and almost degrading attire. They must have acutely felt the portrayal of the Muslim as a higher species; only the Muslim mattered fully in public life and the societal circle was, in fact, closed to the Christian. All too soon it became apparent, however, that this oppressive manner of treating conquered people was driven more by the love of money than by a zealous faith. The caliph wanted to see cash for everything. The more generous the head tax flowed, the better his world. As more and more people became Muslim, however, this tax revenue declined proportionately. More often than not, therefore, the palace in Baghdad viewed mass conversion with regret. The declining number of Christians in only a few years caused the tax revenue in Egypt to fall from ten to three million dinars, an embarrassing statistic (Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 22).

40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 23-24.
43. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 24-26. Kuyper observes everything that conduces to solid education: the size (large) and location of the main classroom building (near the tombs of the caliphs and adjacent to one of the earliest mosques in Cairo); favorable weather (mostly year-round in Cairo)

and open-air classes in a courtyard surrounded by colonnades); pedagogical style (student-teacher discourse favored over rigid scholastic forms; teacher proficiency (in both Islam and scholarship); length of study (16 years, from age six to 22); and the use of educational attainment as an evangelizing tool through the course of one's career (op. cit., 26-29).

44. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 389-93; quote from p. 389.
45. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 392-93.
46. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 392.
47. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 456-60.
48. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 456.
49. Kuyper, *OOWZ-I*, 352.
50. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 456-57.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 457.
54. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 457-62. He explains at great length how this symbolic tendency transfers into and infuses the world of art and architecture: "[T]he straight line expresses calm; joy and affliction both are brought to expression in the curved line; in the circle they lose themselves, adrift in the eternal; the bouquet expresses and interprets prayer while the cypress represents the complaining soul. And so the soul in all shapes, tones and luster is externalized; conjuring up the decorative in their art is a reflex of the inner life of the soul. And the best acid test for their success is that the westerner, who now admires the remains of their finished art in the Alhambra Palace, unwittingly comes under a similar impression, enraptured by the enchanting and the fairy-like nature of their art.

The genuine Arab mosque – not the Turkish mosque of the Sophia-type – with the endless square, through which people see as through a forest of slender trees, beckons enticingly. Particularly when it is entirely occupied by a crowd of believers all clad in Eastern robes it is a spectacle of unparalleled beauty, especially at night. The building is not colossal; there is no trace of anything ascending loftily into the heavens. But when one lights a thousand beautiful lamps of colored glass on silver, glittering bases, and the prayer rugs are spread out all over the floor, and the entire forest of columns tingles with

human life, you become involuntarily enraptured by the brilliant spectacle, even if its size does not impress. It speaks so warmly, it has such a fervor, it embraces you so softly and tenderly that you hear every heart beat and feel the wave of emotions undulating toward you. And the pinnacle is reached only when every detail in this decorative art is displayed to the utmost perfection. Their lamps which sometimes fetch more than a thousand guilders each at the auction cannot be surpassed in their dazzling effect of their light. Their faience is suffused with the loveliest hues. Their arabesques are unparalleled in their exquisiteness. And the drapery of their ceilings and arches makes everything alive and spirited which would otherwise be coarse and rigid. And the clothing and mood of the believers pressing into such an enchanted building are in harmony with all that surrounds them" (Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 460-61).

55. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 462.
56. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 46. Kuyper further advises that "The one and only way to win over the popular spirit is by persuading the people to substitute Christianity for their religion" (ibid.). With respect to the imperial/colonial relationship of the English and Egypt in particular, Kuyper notes that economics itself will not change hearts: "Expanding prosperity increases one's sense of self. Gratitude towards those responsible for this prosperity fades quickly with this heightened sense of self. Why should one not soon be able to accomplish equally well what was observed and learned from the English?" (Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 126).
57. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 48-49.
58. Kuyper, *OOWZ-II*, 46.
59. Kuyper, *OOWZ-I*, 7.
60. Kuyper, *OOWZ-I*, 6-8. The presentation upon which this paper is based was delivered in the midst of the run-up to the 2016 US presidential elections. Kuyper's words provide cause to reflect on a number of currently-proposed USA policies as these sharpen the campaign rhetoric.
61. Kuyper, *OOWZ-I*, 1-16, 22-30, 37-42; *OOWZ-II*, 129. One need only note the remarkable rise of Japan as an economic giant throughout the 20th century, and the eclipsing of almost all major economies of the world by the current Chinese economic miracle.