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The Presence of the Past: A Review of Abraham Kuyper's *On Education*



by Shaun Stiemsma

T.S. Eliot was quite obsessed with the past. Understanding both the pastness of the past and the presence of the past was central to his battle against the parochialism of time, that tendency to see all things in light only of our current historical moment, with no acknowledgement of or interest in the long view of history. The presence of the past is frequent in U.S. political debate today, both as reminders of the oppressive nature of power in our past, such as statues and monuments, and as the founding fathers and other historical figures are invoked in culture wars to address today's concerns. In general, Reformed Christians in America are probably better than the American public as a whole in maintaining a living connection to the

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past, as we tie our view of the world first and foremost to an ancient sacred text, and second to the "Reformed tradition," from Luther and Calvin and on to, especially for those in the Dutch-Reformed tradition, Abraham Kuyper.

In the interest of bringing this past into the present, Lexham Press is releasing a series of books collecting English translations—some available in English for the first time—of Kuyper's writings on topics from common grace to his political ideology, from Islam to the role of the church in public discourse. The general introduction to the series makes this purpose of invoking the presence of the past clear: "In times of great upheaval and uncertainty, it is necessary to look to the past for resources to help us recognize and address our own contemporary challenges" (Ballor and Flikkema, vii). Most recently published in the series is Kuyper's *On Education*, a collection of various essays, speeches, and other writings loosely centered on the topic of the title. That title gives something of a mistaken idea of the volume's content, particularly compared to some of the other books in the series, which are more purposefully unified and thorough in covering their stated topics.

The title of the collection might more accurately be "Abraham Kuyper On National Educational Policy." Nearly the entire book presents Kuyper as a politician waging a war for "school equality," meaning equal access for parents of all beliefs and all income levels to both state-sponsored schools and private, religious schools in the Netherlands. His arguments change shape with the changing times

and his changing role, as he moves from being a new parliamentarian, feeling like a small minority relative to the then-dominant liberals in the Dutch parliament, to being Prime Minister and feeling that the conservative, religious members of government have real strength to give voice to the religious convictions of a large portion of the population. While this all makes for an interesting character study and presents engaging historical material, it does not give Christian readers interested in education at the level of pedagogical philosophy and practice much to work with.

There is very little in the book, in fact, that could be taken as useful for a Reformed theory of education, and even less that could be specifically put in place by educators in any practical way. This lack is not a complaint against Kuyper, who certainly never set out to write an educational philosophy, and interested readers can glean certain educational principles from the book. However, as the following will show, even these principles are more about policy and administration than direct instruction.

First and foremost, Kuyper argues consistently throughout all contexts that it is parents, not the state, who are responsible for education of children, initially even claiming that the state should only involve itself in education at all “by way of exception ... when parents default on their duty” (45). He argues that the idea that the state is responsible is an inheritance from the French Revolution, and, though he eventually came to accept government financial support for education, he warns that state schools serve only the state and its worldly ideals: “the people of the world are fanatical in their zeal for the world, and they are bent on saturating your children with the spirit of the world” (349). Thus, Kuyper claims, all Christian parents not only deserve access to Christian education but also have an obligation to educate their children in a distinctly Christian way, or, as his culture repeatedly termed it, “a school with the Bible.” He even reserves some of his most vitriolic language in the book—which the editors regularly included, though sometimes with apologies for the stridency of his tone—for Christian parents who send their children to state schools because they believe that the educational standard or the facilities are superior.

A second aspect of Kuyper’s view of education is that all education is “religious,” in that it fundamentally points to some transcendent ideal, even if that ideal is that there is nothing transcendent. Thus, the fallacy of the “neutral” education offered by Dutch liberals in his day is one of Kuyper’s primary targets throughout much of the book. He insists that the idea of an education that is offensive to nobody, where everyone respects everyone else’s beliefs, is patently impossible and a deception practiced on religious believers by supposedly freedom-loving liberals to restrict their freedom of religious thought. In imposing a variously deistic, pantheistic, or agnostic religion upon people, “Liberals are proving to be the opponents of liberty,” declares Kuyper with obvious delight in the irony (194).

Third, though this sounds a lot like the kind of “culture war” language that frequently frames political discourse regarding religion in America today (and more on that later), Kuyper’s view is actually more multicultural than monolithic as regards education. Particularly early in his career, when Kuyper felt himself representative of a repressed minority view, Kuyper endorses an idea of national unity that is not monocultural, which he sees as the agenda of the liberal unitarian or agnostic education: they desire “the unity of the house painter who covers everything with the same color,” while he argues for a “higher unity in the harmony of colors which the artist pursues with a rich diversity of shades and gradations” (160). Although a larger community is stronger for having greater diversity of thought, culture, and belief, Kuyper argues that the education of children (especially primary education) should be presented from a single, unified worldview in a setting in which core agreement between all students, parents, and teachers obtains. Each region that has a significant enough minority to support a school from a particular worldview should then be able to educate its children according to their own preferred view. Kuyper’s consistent ideal of “school equality” is, then, that all parents, whether wealthy or poor, should have access to schools that support their views and will nurture their children as they see fit.

A final principle of education present in the book is a principle central to all of Kuyper’s thinking: worldview fundamentally shapes the entirety

of life. In terms of education, a school with a Bible is entirely different from a school without a Bible in its means, material, and meanings. This view may be Kuyper's longest-lasting impact on education, as the idea that all instruction, not merely instruction in the Bible, religion, and morality, must be shaped distinctly by faith continues to inform practice and curricula in many American Christian schools of a Reformed bent, from elementary education through graduate programs. While this is certainly an essential piece of educational philosophy, it seems unlikely that the idea would be new to its readership, and more thorough explorations of this educational ideal are available elsewhere.

Although the book's title suggests that its intended readership should be teachers and other educators, most primary or secondary teachers, even those whose beliefs follow in the Reformed tradition, would likely find little of interest and even less of use. Who, then, is the intended audience and what is its purpose as a collection? While the audience remains fairly obscure—perhaps Reformed political-science majors or policy and data enthusiasts, since Kuyper includes multiple passages in which he cites numbers and statistics, both actual and projected, and he seems to take particular delight in such minutiae—the purpose of the collection is made quite clear in the prefatory and post-script material written by the editors.

In both the introduction and the concluding essay, the editors push for an application of Kuyper's ideas in the U.S., particularly in a voucher system for private education. Wendy Naylor's introduction cautiously makes a contemporary application, stating that she proposes that "for many Catholics and evangelical Protestants" in the U.S., a "similar situation to the Dutch school struggle has existed for decades" (xl-xli). She portrays the problem in America as one of religious freedom and class struggle, as she references hungry students at a Christian school in

Chicago in which parents had to choose between feeding their children breakfast and sending them to private school. These are undeniably real concerns, and titling the close of the introduction to a book about Dutch educational policy two hundred years ago, "Some Thoughts on Educational Liberty in America," seems to make fairly clear what kinds of conclusions the readership is intended to draw.

The essay that concludes the book, also by Naylor, only furthers the agenda of applying Kuyper's past ideals and policy to our present in a single policy. The essay thoroughly acknowledges the complexity of policymaking and the importance of context in understanding the policies that Kuyper promoted. Naylor takes readers through

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three distinct periods in the development of Kuyper's educational ideas and preferred policies as he worked for equal access to state or private religious education for Dutch people of all income levels and religious views. Naylor carefully acknowledges that Kuyper's views appear to contradict themselves, as he initially rejected any "state subsidy" for Christian schools, and ended up endorsing total subsidy for all schools, whether

public or private, but the through line in all of his writings is belief in educational equality, however much the policies to enact it might vary.

The essay traces the changing landscape of the Dutch educational system and the different policies that Kuyper supported through the years, making a clear emphasis on the importance of understanding context and change through time, as well as the political realities of what it takes to turn ideals into policy. Nonetheless, the essay concludes that Kuyper's ideas are sufficiently applicable in the contemporary U.S., endorsing "a system which recognizes the right of parents from multiple worldviews to establish their own schools with equal claim to public support" (397). Naylor continues more specifically to endorse making "education vouchers available to all parents who desire to send

their children to private schools” (398), without acknowledging the changes in time, space, and law between the Netherlands over a century ago and modern America or delving into the same contextual analysis of American education and culture that gave context to Kuyper’s ideas and policies. Naylor also incorporates similar rhetoric to that employed by Kuyper, reflecting the centrality of a “culture war” approach to political engagement, as she laments “the grievous violation of conscience suffered by thousands and thousands of parents who take offense at the ‘indoctrination’ in the public schools, but have no viable alternative, due to poverty” (397). Certainly Naylor is addressing a genuine concern, but the importation of the language of culture war and the total focus on one application of Kuyper’s thought and work regarding education on a single U.S. policy are problematic. If the material presented by Kuyper in the book is to be used to endorse specific policies in the U.S., there is far more work to be done than that which the book itself provides.

Kuyper himself gives some alternatives to the problem of such a singular application of his thinking in the section of the book most thoroughly dedicated to being educated: on scholarship. Though it is geared toward students, and a very particular sort of student, rather than educators, Kuyper’s convocation addresses at the Free University are printed in the book, and they broaden his educational ideas beyond state policy. Although they have been available elsewhere before, his words here tend to call for further study and more varied application than the quick conclusions that the editors seem to call for. His 1900 convocation address articulates a Reformational way of thinking about education, and it complicates the quick conclusion that the editors of the book seem to endorse. He responds to criticisms that education at the Free University is merely “indoctrination in time-worn propositions” (116), a wrong-headed and blind importation of the past into the present rather than a genuine engagement in learning and understanding. He responds that students at the Free University seek to find the truth, whatever it is, in every field, while standing on the grounds of their historical beliefs, and that the task of every science is “first, to establish; second, to deduce; and third, systematize” (126). A

Christian university, he argues, does not merely accept what is previously established and indoctrinate students in it but must pursue truth using reason that stands on faith. Thus, while it may be that the Dutch “doctrine” of educational liberty may be applicable in some way in the U.S. today, more work must be done to establish, deduce, and systematize its application within our own context rather than simply assuming that a past system can be imported to our present through one policy.

His earlier address, given in 1889, offers another central Reformed educational idea, and understanding the contemporary application of this idea is perhaps more far-reaching than any voucher system. In the speech, he considers the core purpose of education in God’s design, and he emphasizes the emptiness of a utilitarian education: one who studies “with one goal in mind: once and for all, and as quickly and cheaply as possible, to be done with bookish learning” (102) and learns only “to acquire a steady position and a guaranteed salary” (103) condemns him or herself to be merely “a hewer of wood and drawer of water” (104) rather than a “nurseryman in [a] consecrated garden” (108). While Kuyper here addresses scholars and researchers in the arts and sciences at a university rather than elementary students, the relevance of his insistence upon transcending practical, economic purposes in education certainly deserves considered application in the current state of education in the U.S., from primary to graduate programs, both in public and private institutions. Given that even Reformed institutions of higher learning are dropping humanities programs and focusing on maximizing practical programs and student outcomes, we may have more to learn from this focus in Kuyper’s view of education than from all of his shifting statements on state educational policies.

Distinguishing between the “pastness of the past,” that which is lost and utterly other about the past, and its presence, its living shaping of our institutions, ideals, and actions, is a difficult task. *On Education* encourages its readers to engage in considering how Kuyper’s past ideas and programs for education might shape American educational policy today, but, despite ideas implicit in the book’s editorial material, Kuyper’s words should not be seen as an end to that conversation or as

an endorsement of single policy, but rather as an opening to further discussion. Rather than assuming that Kuyper's ideas neatly, or nearly enough, correspond to voucher systems in America today, educators, politicians, historians, philosophers, and more might use these ideas and their contexts as a

starting point for radically reconsidering not only our primary education model at a national level but also our modern insistence upon the utilitarian nature of education, our ideas about the religious nature of education, our posture in a pluralist culture, and much more.