

# Kuyper and Apartheid: A revisiting

Patrick Baskwell (Brandon, Florida, USA)<sup>1</sup>

Research Associate: Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics  
University of Pretoria

## Abstract

*Was Abraham Kuyper, scholar, statesman, and university founder, the ideological father of Apartheid in South Africa? Many believe so. But, there are others, amongst them George Harinck of the Free University in Amsterdam, who don't think so. The article argues that there is an element of truth in both opinions. Kuyper did exhibit the casual racism so characteristic of the Victorian era, with its emphasis on empire building and all that it entailed. Kuyper was also directly responsible, ideologically, for the social structure in the Netherlands known as "verzuiling" or "pillarization" in terms of which members of the Catholic, Protestant, or Socialist segments of society had their own social institutions. This pillarizing, or segmenting, of society was, however, always voluntary. This is not true of the pillarizing or segmenting of South African society known as Apartheid. While there are similarities between Apartheid and "verzuiling", especially in their vertical partitioning of the individual's entire life, the South African historical context, the mediation of Kuyper's ideas through South African scholars, the total government involvement, and therefore, the involuntary nature of Apartheid, point to their inherent dissimilarity. Apartheid was simply not pure Kuyper. Hence, while the effects of Kuyper's ideas are clearly discernable in Apartheid policy, the article aims at arguing that Kuyper cannot be considered the father of Apartheid in any direct way.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In a recent article, George Harinck, director of the Historisch Documentatiecentrum voor het Nederlands Protestantisme (1800-current) at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, describes the beginnings of his research for a book on Abraham Kuyper. He recounts that it was during the initial stages of this research that he first encountered the widespread belief that Abraham Kuyper was one of the intellectual fathers of South African Apartheid. In the course of the article that followed, Harinck sought to debunk

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr Patrick Baskwell holds a doctoral degree in theology from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (the Netherlands) and is a research associate of Prof Dr Johan Buitendag, Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria.

this charge. But, was he correct in this? In the following pages I would like to take another look at the notion of Abraham Kuyper as one of the fathers of Apartheid. Can this charge be so easily dismissed? It is to this question that I would now like to turn.

## **2. THE CONSENSUS**

In sampling the scholarship of the last twenty years or so on the subject of Apartheid, the name of Abraham Kuyper appears quite frequently. Frequently enough, one might say, to at least intimate a connection between the two. All who write on the subject in one way or another seem to pay homage to Kuyper and his role in the evolution of the concept. Before delving to any extent into Kuyper's role, however, I would like first to arrive at a working definition of Apartheid and how it differs, at least to my mind, from simple racial segregation.

In her 1999 evaluation of church/state relations in South Africa, entitled, *State, Civil Society, and Apartheid in South Africa*, Tracy Kuyperus makes the point that a shift took place under former Prime Minister H F Verwoerd (Prime Minister from 1958-1966) from a "simple horizontal segregation" to 'positive apartheid'" (Kuyperus 1999:95). Commenting further on this "positive apartheid", she writes: "White domination and control continued through Verwoerd's 'restructured' apartheid vision which assumed a more 'vertical' apartheid but in reality encompassed 'political' separation superimposed upon economic and social inequality in an integrated society" (Kuyperus 1999:95). I think the architecture applied to the terms "apartheid" as vertical and "segregation" as horizontal is telling and I would like to return to this distinction later. For now, I would like to quote Tracy Kuyperus at some length in her discussion of the relationship between segregation and apartheid. She begins by stating that:

Segregation, "a complex amalgam of political, ideological and administrative strategies designed to maintain and entrench white supremacy at every level," developed into a cogent, systematic ideology in South Africa in response to the changes accompanied by industrialization from 1900 through the 1930s .... different interpretations exist concerning a distinction between segregation and apartheid, with liberals arguing that apartheid represents a fundamental break from the past and revisionists asserting that apartheid was merely an extension of segregation.

(Kuyperus 1999:39)

Endeavoring to find the real difference between these two terms, while at the same time acknowledging the ideological complexity of her task, she writes:

The relationship between apartheid and segregation is exceedingly complex. It is difficult to argue that apartheid represents a dramatic break with the past because the ideology of apartheid was built on the model and edifice of segregation. Additionally, both segregation and apartheid policy were formulated in response to rising industrialization and growing African proletarianization .... But it is also incorrect to see apartheid as an extension of segregation. Real differences in ideology and content arise. Apartheid policy was based on a dogmatic notion of cultural separation. Much of its ideology rested on romantic nationalism and Kuyperian Calvinism. ... Saul Dubow, a scholar who analyzes the ideology of apartheid and segregation, points to the difference in the following words: "Whereas the hallmark of segregation was its ambiguity and flexibility, apartheid ideology was unremitting in its zeal and logic."

(Kuyperus 1999:39-40)

After investigating both ideologies, Kuyperus concludes:

In sum, both segregation and apartheid meant the concentration of power in the hands of a white minority. However, apartheid was different from segregation in its grand notions of vertical separation along race lines. It sought the separation of races in all areas of life, hiding this in the shroud of equality among cultures, while segregationist proponents were still wondering how far cultural segregation needed to go.

(Kuyperus 1999:40)

James Michener, in his novel on South Africa entitled, *The Covenant*, captures perfectly the sense of both the old and the new in his definition of Apartheid. He writes:

The complex fabric of old custom and new law ... came to be known as *apartheid*, a classic example of the misfortune Afrikaners had in naming things. The word meant *apartness*, and did not appear in the older dictionaries of the language; it was invented, and reflected their belief that God willed the races be kept separate, each progressing properly at its own speed within its own confines.

(Michener 1980:736)

***Kuyper and Apartheid: A revisiting***

Michener elaborates further on how the Afrikaner and his descendents saw the hand of God in what they were doing; establishing a separate nation and race.

The Afrikaner saw the hand of God in the creation of this small nation, and was determined to isolate it from admixtures that would dilute its purity. Indeed, it was difficult to find a more homogeneous, handsome and dedicated body of people than those Afrikaners nurtured on the veld and in the valleys of the continent's southern tip. Of course, the pure Dutch strain had been infused with contributions from the gifted Huguenots who filtered in, never many in number, and with heavier contributions from the Germans, who at times actually outnumbered the Dutch. But these were peoples of roughly the same physical and mental inheritance. Additions from the English were inescapable; they came to form a large part of the white community. And it would have been impossible for the Afrikaner not to draw, too, from the Hottentot, the Black and the Coloured. In pioneer days he acknowledged this, but his descendents were determined to prevent any further penetration of their white laager.

(Michener 1980:737)

British historian Paul Johnson, in *Modern Times*, his insightful analysis of the twentieth-century, traces the earlier form of segregation, which for Johnson is enshrined in the pass or pass-book laws dating back to "Elizabethan regulations to control 'sturdy beggars'" (Johnson 1983:520). "Apartheid", Johnson writes, "first appeared as a political programme in 1948, treating the Reserves as the proper homeland for Africans where their rights and citizenship were rooted" (Johnson 1983:522).

Johnson goes on to find similarities between Apartheid and "Hitler's racial ideas and his plans for segregated settlement in Eastern Europe, though it (Apartheid) added a Biblical underpinning lacking in Hitler's atheist panorama" (Johnson 1982:522). While Johnson does not mention Abraham Kuyper, he does see a Biblical rationale, or theological justification, supporting Apartheid ideology in the popular mind. It is interesting that Norman Cohn also sees a theological provenance to Hitler's racial program; one solidly wedded to Tracy Kuyperus's "romantic nationalism" (Kuyperus 1999:39). He writes:

It is true that in the nineteenth century a naïve and explicit supernaturalism was gradually replaced by an orientation which was secular and which even claimed to be scientific, so that what had once been demanded by 'the will of God' was now demanded by the 'purposes of history'. But the demand itself remained

unchanged: to purify the world by destroying the agents of corruption. What is more, the agents of corruption were still identified with social groups which had been so regarded already in the Middle Ages: sometimes “the great ones” (now called “the bourgeoisie”) and sometimes the Jews – with the clergy inevitably less prominent than they were, yet not wholly forgotten either. And as for the coming society itself – that too was pictured much as it had been in the Middle Ages: as a state of total community, a society wholly unanimous in its beliefs and wholly free from inner conflicts. Such was the tradition of apocalyptic fanaticism which – secularised and revived – was inherited by Lenin and by Hitler.

(Cohn 1961:309-310)

### **3. FERTILE SOIL**

This amalgamation of religious ideology and romantic nationalism is woven into the very fabric of South Africa. While they may be inseparable, the nationalism finds its origins in the religious ideology as it first became rooted and then developed in a distinctly South African context. Kuyper himself understood this. “Their religion,” he writes of the early Dutch settlers, “thoroughly Calvinistic, is the very soul of their chivalrous existence and completely harmonizes with it. The Old Testament, above all, has impressed them with the paramount value of fervent piety in the consolidation of national strength” (Kuyper [1900] 1998:331). While Kuyper does not elaborate further on the nature of the Afrikaner religious mind, J Alton Templin provides some rather pertinent associations. He is very persuasive in arguing that the “theological interpretations developed by the Afrikaners were an outgrowth of, and indirectly related to, the wide influence of the Reformed faith” (Templin 1984:5). Further, he is convinced that it is specifically the doctrine of “election;” rather “cultural election and divine election were amalgamated into one basic assumption” (Templin 1984:6-7). At a very basic level this is true “because the concept of the elect people is one of the theological elements underlying the total development of Afrikaner culture” (Templin 1984:7). Templin elaborates on this doctrine as seen in its theological and, subsequent, cultural form:

The challenges of the South African frontier caused unique modifications in the doctrine of the elect people. The permutations appear in several aspects of the culture: Afrikaners believed they must maintain a scriptural framework for their government and for their personal lives; they assumed that cultural advancement was a sign of God’s approval; they sought freedom from Dutch, or more usually British domination; they fought to maintain their language

### ***Kuyper and Apartheid: A revisiting***

whether Dutch or Afrikaans; They assumed they were superior to Africans educationally and culturally, and hence more surely were chosen; and they integrated the theological ideology into their total culture. Afrikaner leaders saw themselves as a special people led as the pastoral children of Abraham in search of prosperity and religious peace or as followers of a new Moses or Joshua going to a promised land. They had made their covenant with God, and they believed implicitly that He was to be their God in a special way, and they were a special people in His sight. This interpretation soon ceased to be strictly theological and entered the realm more properly called legend, or even rationalization, as leaders attempted to justify their position in the last half of the nineteenth century. With this understanding of themselves and the theological interpretation of their own cultural destiny, they conquered the wilderness while they oppressed the Africans; they exploited the land while they opposed social reforms inspired by European intellectual developments; they became more orthodox in their theology while they reacted against various new theological and philosophical ideas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In many ways the Afrikaner society retained its seventeenth-century character until after the Boer War. The theological and scriptural doctrine of an elect people afforded a means whereby the Afrikaners could both create a new society and react against a foreign influence. The Afrikaners' understanding of, and use of, the Calvinistic doctrine of election was scarcely what the Genevan Reformer had envisaged or what the leaders of Dort had attempted to make specific. Rather, their interpretation of themselves as elect or chosen was always a permutation, an adaptation of the original doctrine, taken from the invisible realm of high theology, transformed radically, and returned to their ethnic context of Old Testament narrative.

(Templin 1984:8-9)

Jonathan Gerstner, in his informative book aptly subtitled: *Dutch Reformed Covenant Theology and Identity in Colonial South Africa*, points specifically to the covenantal relationship between God and God's elect people as the root cause of early segregation and, eventually, the intense nationalism that so characterized the Afrikaner people. He writes that,

The argument of the distinction between Christian and non-Christian being the source of racial inequality is distinctly South African. The Reformed emphasis on particular grace and continuity with Old Testament Israel, the particular people of God, combined with a uniquely Dutch Reformed emphasis on internal covenantal holiness of children of the covenant from their earliest years,

worked in this particular colonial context to build a unique attitude to race relations.

(Gerstner 1991:260)

This covenant concept was used in an insular way; as a tool both of exclusivity and of preservation.

The separating side of the covenant came to the fore even while the humanitarian side was failing. The farmers on the frontier gained a sense of calling as a Christian people, but the relationship to those outside the community did not readily allow for their incorporation. Indeed their incorporation would threaten the unity of the group. Admission to the church, covenant, and people was by birth alone.

(Gerstner 1991:259)

According to Gerstner, the underlying thesis here is that “the entire European community is Christian from birth; the entire non-white community is alienated from God by birth” (Gerstner 1991:259). Though admitting disagreements and variations, writes T Dunbar Moodie, “I watched the Afrikaner civil religion come into being after 1881” (Moodie 1975:xiii). This fertile soil of theological exclusivity and its justification of racial inequality and, thus, separation, provided a ready medium for the reception Abraham Kuyper’s concept of “sphere sovereignty.”

#### **4. KUYPER’S ROLE**

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 1880, Abraham Kuyper delivered an address inaugurating the Vrije Universiteit (Free University) in Amsterdam. Entitled *Souvereiniteit in Eigen Kring* (“Sovereignty in one’s own sphere”), this seminal speech outlined Kuyper’s vision of the world; one which, he wanted expounded and propagated by the new institution. Briefly stated, sphere sovereignty starts with the assumption that all power and authority (sovereignty) on earth has been given to Christ. Christ thereupon divides or delegates this power and authority amongst the different spheres, or institutions, of life. Hence, to quote Kuyper:

The name or image is unimportant, so long as we recognize that there are in life as many spheres as there are constellations in the sky and that the circumference of each has been drawn on a fixed radius from the center of a unique principle, namely, the apostolic

### ***Kuyper and Apartheid: A revisiting***

injunction *hekastos en toi idioi tagmati* [‘each in its own order’: 1 Cor. 15:23]. Just as we speak of a “moral world,” a “scientific world,” a “business world,” the “world of art,” so we can more properly speak of a ‘sphere’ of morality, of the family, of social life, each with its own *domain*. And because each comprises its own domain, each has its own sovereignty within its bounds. There is a domain of nature in which the Sovereign exerts power over matter according to fixed laws. There is also a domain of the personal, of the household, of science, of social and ecclesiastical life, each of which obeys its own laws of life, each subject to its own chief. A realm of thought where only the laws of logic may rule. A realm of conscience where none but the Holy One may give sovereign commands. Finally, a realm of faith where the person alone is sovereign who through that faith consecrates himself in the depths of his being. The cogwheels of all these spheres engage each other, and precisely through that interaction emerges the rich, multifaceted multiformity of human life. Hence also rises the danger that one sphere in life may encroach on its neighbor like a sticky wheel that shears off one cog after another until the whole operation is disrupted. Hence also the *raison d’être* for the special sphere of authority that emerged in the State. It must provide for sound mutual interaction among the various spheres, insofar as they are externally manifest, and keep them within just limits.

(Kuyper [1880] 1998:467-468)

Kuyper, then, building upon the general principle of sphere sovereignty proceeds to apply this concept to the arena of Christian scholarship. Accordingly, Christian scholarship by its very name distinguishes itself from secular, or humanistic, scholarly endeavors. The sphere of Christian scholarship needs to be free to take its own road, arising from its own principle, in investigating the sciences, law, and philosophy – hence the name Free University. Using the term “separate development”, for his overall vision, Kuyper makes some very revealing comments in the course of fending off his imaginary critics. He writes:

Finally, if you ask whether we want this separate development not only for theology but for all the disciplines, and if you can scarcely control a smile when someone scoffs at “Christian medicine” and “Christian logic”, then listen to our reply to that objection. Do you think that we would confess God’s revelation – reformed, after its deformation – as the starting point of our efforts and draw upon this source only as theologians, scorning it as artists, jurists, and

students of letters? Can you think of a science worthy of the name whose knowledge is divided up into cubbyholes?

(Kuyper [1880] 1998:487)

By means of a whole series of questions, certainly meant to be rhetorical when they were written and covering several pages, Kuyper seeks to pit the concepts of medicine, law, natural science, and letters over against their Christian counterparts as polar opposites. Even though these subjects cover much the same material from both a Christian and secular educational perspective, nevertheless Kuyper wishes to deny them any common ground based upon what he considers incompatible ideological presuppositions. Hence, in Kuyper's mind, there is an absolute need for separate development for each subject. His rationale in this regard is:

How could it be otherwise? Man in his antithesis as fallen *sinner* or self-developing *natural creature* returns again as the "subject that thinks" or "the object that prompts thought" in every department, in every discipline, and with every investigator. Oh, no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: "Mine!"

(Kuyper [1880] 1998:488)

In historical Reformed thought there has always been a distinction made between the world and the church. Historically, this idea has been known as the "antithesis," and it teaches that ever since the "fall of man", the world has been at enmity with the people of God. But with Kuyper and his concept of sphere sovereignty, we now have the idea of the antithesis writ large. Hence, while Kuyper believed the antithesis was rooted in ideological differences based ultimately upon one's relationship with God and not, at least initially, upon any inherent cultural, political, or racial differences, the application of these ideas to society at large did not always remain so confined.

## **5. SPHERE SOVEREIGNTY AS VERTICAL SEPARATION**

Both in his capacity as Prime Minister of the Netherlands and in his later writings on state-craft, Abraham Kuyper offered the people of the Netherlands an interesting model for living peacefully in a pluralistic society. While this model was based squarely on his concept of "sphere sovereignty", elements

### ***Kuyper and Apartheid: A revisiting***

of Kuyper's antithetical thinking are clearly in evidence. This model came to be known as "*Verzuiling*", that is "pillarisation" or "vertical pluralism".

According to Michael Wintle:

Dutch society (was) split into several vertical blocs based on common ideologies rather than on socio-economic class loyalties, resulting in a Catholic bloc, a Calvinist bloc, a Socialist bloc, and a fourth liberal or neutral "pillar". The system was more or less unique in its Dutch form, and dominated the nation between about 1920 and 1960, with only the elite of each bloc in contact with the elites of the other pillars, producing a succession of political compromises at the highest level in order to run the country smoothly, while the rank and file of the pillars' followings were able to live in almost hermetically sealed ideological isolation. The design and effect of the system, which went far beyond the purely political sphere, was that Dutch Catholics, for instance, could exist within an almost exclusively Catholic world, while Dutch Socialists were able to live a Socialist life "from the cradle to the grave."

(Wintle 1987:1-2)

The upshot of this "pillarisation" was that each group, Calvinists, Catholics, and Socialists had their own societal institutions. There were Calvinist churches, banks, and coffeehouses as well as Catholic and Socialist ones. "Kuyper and Schaepman" (Kuyper's Catholic partner in political matters), concludes Michael Wintle wryly, "went on to build a separate but complete alternative society within that modern world for those who still wished to live by their faith" (Wintle 1987:60-61). Kuyper saw all this as a result of education, which he felt "should be in the hands of the religious groups, subsidised where necessary by the state" (Wintle 1987:65).

While this particular design for living in a pluralistic society flows naturally from Kuyper's concept of sphere sovereignty, the ground upon which Kuyper based his plan for this pluralistic society was his doctrine of common grace. Kuyper was convinced that the fall of humanity was mitigated by a common grace of God, which God imparted into creation to keep mankind from degenerating wholly into oblivion. As Kuyper himself puts it: "This manifestation of grace consisted in restraining, blocking, or redirecting the consequences that would otherwise have resulted from sin. It intercepts the natural outworking of the poison of sin and either diverts and alters it or opposes and destroys it" (Kuyper [1902] 1998:168).

This common grace had the effect of sanctifying those areas of life, which were not subject to sovereign, particular grace, such as politics. In fact,

writes McKendree Langley, “while the Christian political and social principles were related to theological concepts, they had a special place in the common grace aspect of life” (Langley 1984:74). Thus, common grace allowed those of differing creeds to cooperate in political and societal formulations, since God’s grace was in evidence here also. According to Kuyper, God also extended this common grace was to unbelievers, that is the non-elect, which, in turn, accounts for the good that they do in their chosen professions as well as in government.

Kuyper’s societal spheres, “*zuilen*” or pillars, were, for all intents and purposes, sovereign spheres with their own internal authority, which were not to be encroached upon by other spheres or other authorities. That is to say, in the family, the mother and father are the lawful authority in that sphere and they are not to be eclipsed by the authority of either the government or the church. Similarly, the authority in the church is not to be abrogated in favor of governmental authority, nor is the authority of government to be under the controlling influence of the church. At the societal level, the Calvinist sphere, the Catholic sphere, and the Socialist sphere were not free to encroach upon the territory of the other, nor were they free to coerce each other in any way.

## 6. SPHERE SOVEREIGNTY AND APARTHEID

While “*Verzuiling*” in the Netherlands was the result in society of Kuyper’s theological concept of “sphere sovereignty,” in a South African context “sphere sovereignty” provided for a significant variant: Apartheid. Viewed from another perspective, it could be said that Kuyper’s idea of “sphere sovereignty” gave cohesion and structure to the prevailing romantic nationalism not previously considered, ultimately producing South Africa’s system of Apartheid. Either way, while Kuyper’s ideas were prominent in Apartheid’s structure, they were not pure Kuyper. Kuyper’s concepts were received by enthusiasts of his thought and transformed into something, which I believe, Kuyper, had he lived to see it, would have abhorred.

Several noted professors from Potchefstroom University were the point of contact, if you will, with the Netherlands for the dissemination of Kuyper’s ideas in South Africa. George Harinck readily admits that the “Free University was related to Potchefstroom University” but rather, and correctly I think, sees this relation, among other things, as a reason that “the Dutch Calvinists were all the more opposed to apartheid” (Harinck 2002:184). I further believe that a significant portion of this opposition was due to the fact that Kuyper was increasingly absent from the ideas that were emanating from South Africa, which all the while claimed to be Kuyperian. Tracy Kuyperus, in several instances, refers to these promoters as Neo-Kuyperians; “Calvinists within the

***Kuyper and Apartheid: A revisiting***

NGK and GK (who) adopted Kuyper's ideas of diversity and separate structural spheres in their explanation of racial and ethnic separation" (Kuyperus 1999:67). "Neo-Kuyperian Calvinists like J.C. Rooy, H.G. Stoker, and J.D. du Toit, based mainly within the *Gereformeerde Kerk*," writes Kuyperus, "differed from the pragmatic pietists and missionary-minded evangelicals by emphasizing opposing themes, for example, divine election, common grace, God-willed diversity, and sphere sovereignty, derived from ... Abraham Kuyper" (Kuyperus 1999:67).

Kuyperus puts an emphasis on Kuyper's idea of diversity, however, that is absent from others who write on the subject. Briefly stated though, writes Kuyperus, "diversity was the norm defining the world. Different nations or peoples were willed by God and needed to maintain their separateness, otherwise this God-willed pluriformity of peoples would disappear" (Kuyperus 1999:67). It is because of this amalgamation of sphere sovereignty and diversity, Kuyperus argues, that "F J M Potgieter ... one of the many prominent NGK clergymen who devised the ... neo-Calvinist framework of separation using neo-Kuyperian logic applied to the South African situation" (Kuyperus 1999:68), can write:

If this presupposition is applied in our circumstances in this multiracial land, then it is quite clear that no-one can ever be a proponent of integration on the basis of the Scriptures. It would be a direct contradiction of the revealed will of God to plead for a commonality between Whites, Coloureds and Blacks ... It is now abundantly clear that God himself has ordained that the ... pluriformity of the peoples as well as that of the churches should continue to the consummation ... The true unity in all its glory and blessedness will be revealed for the first time in the glory kingdom.

(Kuyperus 1999:68)

Professor J D du Toit (Totius), Professor of Theology at Potchefstroom University and former student at the Vrije Universiteit in the Netherlands (Thompson 1985:35), addressing a "meeting on the religious bases of apartheid," shows himself an even more ardent supporter of Apartheid and its "Divine mandate" than Potgieter. "Because racial differences are grounded in the ordinances of creation, argued Totius, racial integration is not only foolish, it is sinful. Apartheid is thus justified, because God calls the Afrikaner to implement it for the well-being of black and white alike. Racial separation is thus not only a Boer tradition, it represents the Divine Will" (Moodie 1975:248). In this and other formulations of its kind, Professor J D du Toit

went well beyond his Dutch mentor. Nowhere in any of Kuyper's writings, at least to my knowledge, can one find prescriptions for racial segregation based upon tradition, Divine mandate or anything else for that matter

In the writings of Professor H G Stoker, also of Potchefstroom University, writes T Dunbar Moodie, "South African neo-Calvinism moved beyond Kuyper in its systematic specification of the different types of 'spheres' within which God's sovereignty is independently exercised" (Moodie 1975: 65). Stoker distinguished between "individual, social, or cultural spheres" (Moodie 1975: 65), all under the umbrella, or rubric of sphere sovereignty. Therefore, writes Moodie:

Each of these three categories of spheres has a special "destiny" (bestemming) in God's plan. Hence, one might speak of individual, social, or cultural "calling" (roeping), depending on the sphere in which it is discharged. However, for all the diversity of destinies and callings, all are ultimately interdependent because of their common subjection to God's will.

(Moodie 1975:65)

The upshot of this reasoning, for Stoker at least, was that "culture is thus the handiwork of God, working through man. Cultural spheres exist apart from social relationships and have their own structural principles defined by their own unique destinies .... (Therefore) the People (*volk*) was a separate social sphere with its own structure and purpose" (Moodie 1975: 66). Moodie believes, and correctly so I think, that here we have Stoker's Calvinism taking on the cast of the Afrikaner civil religion and redefining itself to accommodate a theory of separate development that the People or *Volk* would require.

## 7. THE VOLK CONCEPT

The concept of Afrikaners as a People or *Volk* is also integral to the notion of separate development, i.e. Apartheid. Former Transvaal President Paul Kruger liked to say that "the People (*Volk*) are the elect of God with a God-given destiny" (Thompson 1985:32). The *Volk* Movement dating from Napoleonic times developed primarily on German soil. Paul Johnson writes that: "it was the national expression of the German Romantic movement, with its stress upon the *Volk*, its mythology and its natural setting in the German landscape, especially its dark mysterious forests .... A *Volk* had a soul, which was derived from its natural habitat" (Johnson 1983:118). This concept of the *volk* did not always work in tandem with the concepts inherited from Kuyper; at times they clashed. Tracy Kuyperus details well the reception of this *volk*

### ***Kuyper and Apartheid: A revisiting***

concept in South Africa and its subsequent influence within Afrikaner religious and political circles. She writes:

It should be noted in passing that another ideological influence on the NGK's development of a "theology of apartheid" in the 1940s, working parallel to but sometimes clashing with Kuyperianism, was the secular, Germanic, neo-Fichteian ideas of romantic nationalism. The writings of J.G. Herder and J.G. Fichte glorified authoritarian nationalism and presented an idealized notion of the *volk* as an organic unity that was God-willed and with a unique historical destiny. Afrikaner intellectuals like G. Cronje and N. Diederichs, who studied in Germany and were exposed to these ideas, brought neo-Fichteian ideology to South Africa in the 1930s. Neo-Kuyperian Calvinism and neo-Fichtian ideologies influenced the development of Christian-Nationalism, Afrikaner Nationalism, and apartheid through their notions of culture, nation, sovereignty, and a host of other ideas.

(Kuyperus 1999:68)

Tracy Kuyperus goes on to say that these results were also "responses" to specific social problems perceived by the Afrikaner, whether real or imagined.

These ideas did not arise in a vacuum. They appealed to nationalists within the NGK who were trying to respond to the massive dislocation experienced by Afrikaners due to industrialization, the crisis in agriculture, the diminution of Afrikaner culture, the poverty of "poor whites", and so forth. Leaders within the church were trying to understand the changes and provide Afrikaners with definitive strategies that would give them hope in dealing with the change that threatened their lives. More pointedly, due to the dislocation caused by urbanization and industrialization, the NGK contextualized its theology (the theology of apartheid) in ways that responded to the social and material fears of the Afrikaner people.

(Kuyperus 1999:68)

## **8. APARTHEID AS A POLITICAL PROGRAM**

With the political victory of the National Party in the 1948 elections, Afrikaner nationalism was enshrined with a vengeance in a series of laws that, collectively, came to be known as Apartheid. The political was, however, never very far removed from the religious in this new legal construct. National Party leader and the architect of Apartheid, Dr Daniel Francois Malan was a

Dutch Reformed minister prior to his entry into politics. Most of the principals of this party victory believed that the native races were both inferior and unassimilable (Thompson 1985:69-104). Under such circumstances the only way to preserve Afrikaner culture and all that that contained was to stay separate from those on the outside, that is the non-elect, the heathen, those not in the covenant. Combining many of the ideas we have been discussing, Dr. Malan wrote that: "Genuine religion, unadulterated freedom, and the pure preservation of one's white race and civilization are essential requirements for our own people's existence. Without this the South African people can have no soul and also no future" (Thompson 1985:40). It is for this reason I believe Apartheid was as much a religious doctrine as it was a political one; the two can be distinguished, but they really cannot be separated.

Under Dr H F Verwoerd the ideas articulated in 1948 were implemented to their fullest extent. Of this implementation by Verwoerd and successive administrations, Leonard Thompson writes:

Successive South African administrations proceeded to give effect to this grand racial design. However, the results were anything but peace, prosperity, and justice for the vast majority of the population. Going far beyond previous laws and practices, the government made racial segregation and discrimination pervasive and inescapable; it suppressed dissent with the utmost vigor; and it ensured that most Africans would live in squalid poverty by limiting their rights to land ownership and citizenship to the former reserves, which in Orwellian style, it redesignated as "Homelands".

(Thompson 1985:45)

Paul Johnson, in a strikingly vivid way, compares Afrikaner nationalism from 1948 on with Zionism. He contends that:

What the Nationalists did was to transform segregation into a quasi-religious philosophical doctrine, apartheid. In many ways they were a similar development to African nationalism itself. Their earliest slogan, *Afrika voor de Afrikaaners*, was identical with the black "Africa for the Africans" of the 1960s and 1970s. Their religious sectarianism flourished at the same time as African Zionism and for the same purpose: to bring together in collective defence the oppressed, the unwanted and the discriminated against. It was remarkably similar to Jewish Zionism too, in both its origins and consequences. The Boers created their own Zion, which then served as the focus of hatred and unifying force for the Africans, as Israel did for the Arabs. The first Boer nationalist institutions, 1915-

### ***Kuyper and Apartheid: A revisiting***

1918, were created to provide help for poor whites through job agencies, credit banks and trade unions. They were fiercely anti-Semitic as well as anti-black and anti-British. The movement began with the defence of the underdog, then broadened to promote the political, economic and cultural interests of the Afrikaners as a whole, then in 1948 suddenly made itself overdog, with a vengeance.

(Johnson 1983:522)

Dr B Wielenga of the Gereformeerde Kerk in Pietermaritzburg, in a recent article entitled appropriately “Jood en Afrikaner”, compares aspects of the ideology behind both movements. He makes much of the romantic nationalism that characterizes both groups and the repression it has produced. With this in mind, I think it significant that there are those who want to make Abraham Kuyper to some degree responsible for South African Apartheid when, in fact, his role in Apartheid is actually further removed than that of either Theodor Herzl or Chaim Weizmann in the development of Zionism. This is especially telling given that fact that these men are not subject to any criticism, of which I am aware, for the current problems of the Palestinians. I do not think that Kuyper can be blamed for the plight of South African Blacks any more than Herzl or Weizmann for the plight of present day Palestinians.

## **9. KUYPER’S AND THE POWER OF THE STATE**

Implied within his proposal for “*Verzuiling*”, even though Kuyper believed the state was to provide mutual interaction between the spheres and keep each within its limits (Bratt 1998:468), was a healthy, and all pervasive distrust of the power of the state. This distrust, however, was not shared by those who advocated Apartheid. On the contrary, Apartheid was implemented by the government, at gunpoint, from beginning to end. In his Stone Lectures, delivered at Princeton University in 1898, Kuyper concluded that: “Neither the life of science nor the life of art, nor of agriculture nor of industry nor of commerce, nor of navigation, nor of the family, nor of human relation may be coerced to suit itself to the grace of the government. The state may never become an octopus which stifles the whole of life” (quoted by Wintle 1987:66). Hence, “the task of government”, Kuyper wrote, “was to protect the rights of all social groups while upholding the authority delegated to it alone, the authority essential for national tranquillity and order” Langley 1984:95-96. But, because Kuyper was assertive in speaking of the authority delegated to the state, even referring to it as “sovereignty” (Kuyper [1880] 1998:468), his political rivals in

the Netherlands feared the rise of a theocracy. Political scholar McKendree Langley writes that: “the secular leaders had expressed the fear that the Anti-Revolutionary-Catholic coalition government would eventually act in a theocratic way to repress the civil liberties of the secular parties and their members” (Langley 1984:83). Concerning this state “sovereignty”, Kuyper had already made his position clear in his speech inaugurating of the Free University in 1880:

Thus the sovereignty of the State, as the power that protects the individual and defines the mutual relationships among the visible spheres, rises high *above* them by its right to command and compel. But *within* these spheres that does not obtain. There another authority rules, an authority that descends directly from God apart from the State. This authority the State does not *confer* but *acknowledges*. Even in defining laws for the mutual relationships among the spheres, the State may not set its own will as the standard but is *bound* by the choice of a Higher will, as expressed in the nature and purpose of these spheres. The State must see that the wheels operate as intended. Not to suppress life nor shackle freedom but to make possible the free movement of life in and for every sphere: does not this ideal beckon every nobler head of state?

(Kuyper [1880] 1998:468)

I think it can be safely said that Kuyper abhorred coercion. He believed in individual freedom, and the freedom of association as part and parcel of this concept of individual freedom. Kuyper believed that the decision an individual or family made were the best decisions for that individual or family, and because of his concept of sphere sovereignty, they were not to be interfered with nor superseded by either the government or the church. In other words, Kuyper let people be people, each with their own likes and dislikes and prejudices. He understood that people tend to gravitate to those like themselves, whether similar in religion or in ethnicity. I do not think he deemed this either intrinsically bad or detrimental to society at large. In fact, his pillarization of society actually catered to just this aspect of human nature. This inclination on Kuyper’s part towards individual freedom and the almost total lack of government control, or interference, within the various spheres was significantly lacking in every aspect of South African Apartheid

Because of his views, Kuyper could work for the common good, politically, with those who differed greatly with him theologically. According to McKendree Langley, Kuyper “preferred to speak of ‘Christianity below dogma’

### ***Kuyper and Apartheid: A revisiting***

Catholics and Calvinists could work together while maintaining all of their distinctions because their cooperation took place in the common grace political arena. Their theological and ecclesiastical differences were not the subject of political discussion” (Langley 1984:77).

I think it is also significant that in December 1901, during his tenure as Prime Minister, Kuyper ended a statement to the Parliament, “by defending his policy of Dutch neutrality towards the war in South Africa between the British and the Boers” (Langley 1984:75).

## **10. WAS KUYPER A RACIST?**

In the sphere of the church, Kuyper was almost certainly colorblind, if you will, in conducting its affairs. Especially on the mission field, Kuyper believed it was incumbent upon all to live together and worship together in one church. To this end, writes George Harinck, “In 1896, he (Kuyper) 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” (Harinck 2002:187). George Harinck is quick to point out that with Kuyper’s ascendancy to the office of Prime Minister in 1901, this guiding principle of church planting became public policy. He writes:

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 clear: the Netherlands were not allowed to abuse their superiority over the Dutch East Indies.

(Harinck 2002:187)

While admitting the paternalistic character of such a view, George Harinck concludes that “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 cultural racism of his day, but by his Calvinistic creed of human equality” (Harinck 2002:187).

While these observations from Professor Harinck seem to be rather well grounded, James Bratt, in a collection of Kuyper's shorter works of which he is editor, is definitely not inclined to agree with him. Bratt goes further; he accuses Kuyper's tract on South Africa entitled, "The South African Crisis", as being tainted "with the common European racism of the time" (Bratt 1998:323). This racism, for Bratt at least, is evident in small ways; word choice, a turn of a phrase and an off-handed comment. And, Kuyper's off-handed comments such as "primitive man" (Bratt 1998:336) and "inferior race" (Bratt 1998:339) do seem to give credence to Bratt's charge. Bratt does, however, seek to limit the influence of this "common European racism" as it concerns Kuyper when he concludes that, "it (Kuyper's tract on South Africa) shows the Boer mentality that would, as Kuyper predicted, exact vengeance upon Britain's triumph. Although Kuyper did not anticipate the racist forms of [that] revenge ..." (Bratt 1998:323). According to George Harinck, Kuyper's "famous brochure on The Crisis in South-Africa ... is more anti-British than it is pro-Boer" (Harinck 2002:185).

I am inclined to think that there is an element of truth in what both Bratt and Harinck write concerning Kuyper's racial sensibilities, or the lack thereof. In fact, I do not think they are very far apart; it is, rather, their perspective that differs. First of all, I tend to agree with George Harinck that Abraham Kuyper was himself not a racist per se; still, I think it is possible to discern in Kuyper a certain racial arrogance or pride. This is what Bratt refers to as the "common European racism". No, I am not seeking to contradict myself. I would, however, like to recast this "common European racism", thereby making it a bit more understandable to our twenty-first-century mindset. Gerald Pillay, formerly of the University of South Africa, in a recent article on "Church, State, and Christian Pluralism in South Africa – A Historical Perspective", urges us to take the "long view" in analyzing situations such as existed between church and state in apartheid South Africa. His reason for doing so is that "the requirements of political correctness which inevitably follow in the wake of systems so blatantly oppressive inhibit sober reflection on the problem" (Pillay 1995:71). To my mind, political correctness is little more than cultural mythology – with the greater emphasis placed on the mythological aspect. This cultural mythos changes not only from culture to culture but from time to time within a given culture. We have seen many times what constitutes political correctness change before our very eyes. And, unfortunately, as Professor Pillay reminds us, the political correctness of one time can, and will, inhibit the sober reassessment of previous times. This inhibition takes place because political correctness dictates the terms under which, or the parameters in which one is allowed to consider a matter. Hence, much of what

### ***Kuyper and Apartheid: A revisiting***

constitutes the political correctness of any given time is the “spin” put on the meaning of events and ideas by the prevailing political class, with the express purpose of moulding the thoughts and actions of the masses. This is especially true of South Africa over the course of the last twenty to twenty-five years and it is equally true of America since the 1960s. Cultural mythology adapts to changing times and attitudes, and we have seen these developments take place, always and everywhere. It should come as no surprise, then, that the Netherlands in Kuyper’s day would hold a different cultural mythos/politically correct attitude than what holds sway in modern America or Europe. What was acceptable in Victorian Europe would be looked down upon today, and what is acceptable today would have been viewed from a Victorian perspective with shock if not outright horror. It is common knowledge that the Victorian attitude towards the inhabitants of Africa, and to a lesser extent India, was one of superiority. White Europeans in general viewed the inhabitants of its colonial realms as backward and in need of a civilizing influence; European influence. Hence, Christian missionaries came with a gospel that contained as much Western Culture as it did spiritual teaching. This was the politically correct attitude of the time, and Kuyper attributes just this attitude to the English in large measure (Bratt 1998:335 & 343). In this respect, it is difficult to see how Kuyper himself could have helped but been influenced, to some degree anyway, by this same political correctness. So then, was Abraham Kuyper a racist in the way in which we use the term today? I leave that to you, dear reader, to decide.

## **11. CONCLUSION**

So, was Abraham Kuyper the father of Apartheid? The answer to this question I do not believe to be a simple “yes” or “no.” In fact, I think the answer is both “yes” and “no.” There is no doubt in my mind that it was Kuyper’s theory of “sphere sovereignty” which provided both the form and structure of what later became known as Apartheid. His concept of “*Verzuiling*” was nothing more than “sphere sovereignty” applied in a different context and for different reasons. The similarities are indeed striking.

Still, Abraham Kuyper was not the father of Apartheid. He was maybe a grandfather or a great-uncle, but he is not its ideological father. There were too many other people involved for that to be the case. Kuyper’s ideas, and this involved considerably more than just his theory of “sphere sovereignty,” were disseminated in South Africa primarily through Potchefstroom University and its professors. Specifically, Professors Stoker and Du Toit not only reworked Kuyper’s idea of “sphere sovereignty” to a considerable degree, but also added a great deal more theoretical baggage. Add to this the fertile

religious and political soil found in South Africa at the time and you have a theory that, while it may resemble Kuyper's "Verzuiling", is indeed different both in its theory and practice.

Much of what constituted Kuyper's "Verzuiling" was of a purely voluntary nature for those involved. It was not saturated with government and it was not coercive in nature. This is a far cry from Apartheid which was coercive in the extreme. Kuyper had a strong and, to my mind, healthy distrust of government. Therefore, because of its all pervasive, coercive nature and total government sponsorship, I am convinced that Apartheid is not something that Kuyper would have supported. While it is true that he did exhibit some of the arrogant racial superiority that characterized much of the Victorian era, still, by his very own actions he shows himself more interested in equality than in segregation. So whether Abraham Kuyper was indeed a racist in the sense in which we use the term today, I will leave that to each reader to decide for him or herself.

Additionally, Apartheid is really more than simple racial segregation; it is a complete vertical separation of the races in every way, almost as if they were separate species belonging to different worlds. Therefore, I firmly believe that because Apartheid separated the races into different worlds, and did so at the point of a gun, Kuyper would have eschewed it from the start.

### Works consulted

- Bratt, J D (ed) 1998. *Abraham Kuyper: A centennial reader*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Cohn, N 1961. *The pursuit of the millennium: Revolutionary messianism in medieval and reformation Europe and its bearing on modern totalitarian movements*, Torchbook edition. New York: Harper & Row.
- Gerstner, J N 1991. *The thousand generation covenant: Dutch Reformed covenant theology and group identity in colonial South Africa, 1652-1814*. Leiden: E J Brill.
- Harinck, G 2002. Abraham Kuyper, South Africa, and Apartheid. *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* XXIII 2, 184-187. (New Series 2002.)
- Harinck, G 2006. Conversation with George Harinck in his office at the Vrije Universiteit on 2 February 2006.
- Johnson, P 1983. *Modern times: The world from the twenties to the eighties*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Kuyper, A [1880] 1998. *Sphere sovereignty*, in Bratt 1998:461-490.
- Kuyper, A [1900] 1998. *The South African crisis*, in Bratt 1998:325-360.
- Kuyper, A [1902] 1998. *Common grace*, in Bratt, 1998:165-201.
- Kuyper, A 1931. *Lectures on Calvinism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Kuyperus, T 1999. *State, civil society and Apartheid in South Africa: An examination of Dutch Reformed Church-State relations*. London: Macmillan.

***Kuyper and Apartheid: A revisiting***

- Langley, M R 1995. Emancipation and Apologetics: The formation of Abraham Kuyper's Anti-Revolutionary Party in the Netherlands, 1872-1880. Ph D Thesis. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Theological Seminary.
- Langley, M R 1984. *The practice of political spirituality: Episodes from the public career of Abraham Kuyper 1879-1918*. Jordan Station: Paideia Press.
- Malan, D F 1961. *Afrikaner-volkseenheid en my ervarings op die pad daarheen*. 3rd edition. Kaapstad: Nasionale Boekhandel.
- Moodie, T D 1975. *The rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid, and the Afrikaner civil religion*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Pillay, G J 1995. Church, State and Christian pluralism in South Africa: A historical overview. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* XI 2, 71-86.
- Templin, J A 1984. *Ideology on a frontier: The theological foundation of Afrikaner nationalism, 1652-1910*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Thompson, L 1985. *The political mythology of Apartheid*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Wielenga, B 2004. Jood en Afrikaner. *Die Kerkblad*, 'n Publikasie van de Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika 2004:35-36.
- Wintle, M 1987. *Pillars of piety: Religion in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century 1813-1901*. Hull: Hull University Press.