

## Review of Abraham Kuyper's *On Business & Economics*. Bellingham: Lexham, 2021, lxxi + 429 pp.

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Lexham Press has started a “major series of new translations of Abraham Kuyper’s key works in public theology,” never before available in English, and consisting of twelve volumes. Jordan J. Ballor and Melvin Flikkema are the general editors. This book has been edited and introduced by Peter S. Heslam. Ballor contributes a chapter about Kuyper and the economic teachings of the Heidelberg Catechism. Four hundred pages follow: selected readings of Kuyper himself, presented either in whole or in an abbreviated form.

Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) was a Dutch preacher, theologian, journalist, activist, politician, statesman, and writer. During his lifetime, weekly and at times even daily, he educated a large part of the Reformed common people by his speeches and writings, with great authority among his followers. Kuyper originated a movement of Protestantism that was influential in the Netherlands over a period of some hundred years. He played a chief role in the foundation of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (1892–2004), a merger of two earlier separations of the historical Dutch Reformed Church. He founded the Antirevolutionary Party (1879–1980), the first political party in Europe, and also the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (1880). In the United States, he delivered the Stone Lectures at Princeton in 1898. Kuyper served as prime minister of the Netherlands between 1901 and 1905.

The preliminary pages of the book open with the question: “Why should anybody care about this theologian-philosopher’s analysis of labor unions, government subsidies, and pensions in the Netherlands over a century ago?” It is evident that Kuyper’s public world has almost entirely passed away, sociologically as well as technically. Heslam observes that “the emergence of the large and complex organizations of industrial capitalism” did not yet fully come within Kuyper’s sight (xxi). Therefore, we need first to understand *in what kind of a world we live*, before connecting Kuyper’s economic vision to the very different reality that is ours. The question is all the more important, as Kuyper himself wanted to bring the original Calvinist world and life view “in rapport with” his own time. After the days of Kuyper, the world has more drastically changed than in the period between Calvin and himself—to such an extent that there is no longer any vestige of a common denominator. In this respect, reference can be made to the body of works

of a later European protestant thinker, the Frenchman Jacques Ellul (1912–1994), who demonstrated in depth how capitalism has been superseded by technicism.

The editors of the book seem to have put the concept of economics on a par with business or commerce. This does not stem from Kuyper’s organic view of society, however positively he might have referred to business in particular. Business is an essential part of economics, but the two do not coincide. The difference is generally referred to as the so-called ‘social’ element as in the phrase “social question.” Heslam remarks that the ‘social’ phenomena of poverty, working conditions and pensions “cannot be taken as a proxy for [Kuyper’s] engagement with business itself” (xx). This does not detract from the fact that these things generally in a direct sense do have to do either with business or with the architecture of the economy as a whole. They often are corollaries of, or may be said to be organized by, the business community itself. Kuyper was very much aware of that. At the same time, an economy consists of a great many institutions, circles and relations other than enterprises—however general, indispensable, and conspicuous they may be. In spite of the wording, the ‘social’ question is outright economic. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for the first time in history, economic crises were even caused by the economic system itself. Only the neoclassical individualistic reduction of the economic problem explains the use of the phrase ‘social’ instead of ‘economic.’

The compilers of Kuyper’s anthology on ‘business and economics’ characterize his theology by the tenet of common grace (cf. 105-6). This concept acquires an almost ontological significance, as it does in Kuyper himself. Common grace means that non-believers may be ‘doing the right thing.’ On the other hand, Kuyper states the ‘antithesis,’ which points to the choice between rebellion to God and an attitude of dependence (Ivi). The editors do not in the first place refer to Kuyper’s focus on the law of God being the law of life, and on the glory of God as the aim of life. Nor do they pay much attention to Kuyper’s early discovery of historical Calvinism that overruled liberalism in his view of society. Liberalism (in the European sense of the word of the ideology of modern market society) puts “the moral interest of the people into the background and held out false hopes to the nations of external prosperity” (Kuyper 1879, 91). Nor is, for that matter, Kuyper’s more sociological principle of “sphere sovereignty” put forward—although he considered it indispensable to freedom and development, not only concerning the church and the state, or science and education, but also applying as well to economic life. Is it because sphere sovereignty in practice has been undermined almost to the point of disappearance?

The introduction of Heslam, acknowledging the coherence of Kuyper’s thinking, alludes to the principle of sphere sovereignty, which nowadays is usually entirely misunderstood. It does not relate to world views, religions, or political ideologies (in Dutch the term *zuilen* has come into fashion). ‘Spheres’ are different circles of competence (such as the church or university) that are not subordinated to each other, but coordinated. While introducing the very concept of sphere in

his opening address at the Vrije Universiteit, by way of example Kuyper referred to Spinoza and similar historical instances. The concept is more profound and far more critical than what is meant by ‘sectors’ in society in current sociology or journalism, or ‘relative autonomy’ (which refers to different levels of competency or power). It is essential to distinguish the normative side of spheres and the factual side. A normative sphere is an ordinance of God laid down in his creation as a ‘givenness’ to be historically articulated by human responsibility. The economic meaning of life is to be discovered and developed, not to be made. In this sense, we might call sphere sovereignty ontological, fitting less into the idea of common grace than of creation.

Kuyper did not exchange the notion of civilian society for ‘commercial society,’ as Hesham seems to suggest (xxix). Sphere sovereignty was severely damaged wherever sovereignty was assigned to the money motive. The economic contribution of a firm, however, is defined in terms of the specific goods and services it supplies to society through a well-functioning market, accounting for the externalities of its behavior. At the same time, society is more than economy, just as the national household (150) is more than business. In the Kuyperian tradition, a very serious error is made when moneymaking, which is a concrete subjective aim (reaching beyond any single sphere), is confused or even identified with the general concept of economic functionality. Economic theory is more than the analysis of a particular kind of *institution* (such as the business firm) or of the aim of earning a maximum amount of money (however widely it nowadays may occur). If the objective of an enterprise is limited to moneymaking, its function in the real economy is excluded from the definition. Of course, every enterprise should make a profit. According to Kuyper, the monetary purpose was legitimate as an income to the entrepreneur and as a source for helping the poor. From the perspective of the business itself, profit is subordinated to the continuity and development of the firm in order to enable it to keep serving the general economic interest by adding useful things to the national product. The quality and distribution of the national product, more than its quantity, contribute to the well-being of a people, which is what economics is all about.

When pointing to Kuyper’s positive attitude towards money, one should not only consider the effects of the “incentive of money” (53, 75 and 78)—“chasing after wealth” (360), “money *as money*” (371)—in the real economy, but also take into account the financial sector itself, in order to establish whether and where the role of money is positive or negative. The book contains not only quotations from Kuyper’s *Common Grace* or *Stone Lectures*, but also parts of *E Voto Dordraceno* (cf. 67-72) and *Pro Rege*, and of his meditations. In *Common Grace*, for that part, he warned against the “accumulation of wealth in a few hands” and “an unhealthy ascendancy of capitalism” (394). Economists are well aware of the behavior of the monetary factor in macroeconomics—having, since Kuyper’s death in 1920, increasingly witnessed its instrumentality in economic crises (cf. 59 and 61).

Kuyper still lived in the world experienced by Adam Smith. Neither of them had yet seen the full consequences of the industrial revolution nor, of course, had witnessed the present developments. If Kuyper would have made a more focused study of the economy as such (which in fact he did not<sup>1</sup>), and if he lived nowadays, I believe that he would agree with the words of Marilynne Robinson, who acutely observed: “Impoverishment of populations on the basis of financial self-interest makes a joke of personal freedom. Yet we accept the legitimacy of economic theory that overrides our declared values.” “The global reach of the early industrial system made mass poverty a national asset, as it is now. ... I believe this ‘brazen law,’ as they call it, is still in force in many of those societies with which we are told we are competing” (Robinson 2018, 5 and 94).

From Heslam’s affirmation that Abraham Kuyper was a child of his times (xxvi) it should logically follow (in order to establish the relevance of his theology for *our* times) that not so much his practical views about the economic phenomena of his own days do matter, but that it is the other way round. We need to see how Kuyper reflected on the economy to search the relevance of Christian belief. We should try to re-establish the way Kuyper translates Scriptural belief into theology and social thinking, in order to bring it in rapport with actuality, in our turn. The precondition, however, is that we first obtain an adequate understanding of the complexities of the modern economy and of its dynamics.

This well-composed collection then turns out to be an abundant source of fruitful insights. Kuyper is foremost a man of principle (*beginself*). Such a man is “just as inextricably bound up with it, as he is free from its temporal form of appearance” (Kuyper 1879, vii). The question remains which ‘appearance of principle’ presses forward on the basis of Christian belief and perspective in view of the economy of *our* days. Usually, theologians who speak about economics limit themselves to ‘economic objectives.’ In so doing they fail to bring about any communication with modern economists. On the contrary, as a matter of methodology within their science, the latter discard any talk about the choice of economic ends. Economic analysis as it stands remains untouched. Kuyper, however, would not be a Calvinist without stressing our responsibility in the use of means. But as to economics, he remained in essence a writer belonging to the era of Smith, who pointed to the Dutch economy of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the model he had in mind. It was a commercial world still mainly existing of shops and artisans: the butcher, the brewer and the baker.

Keeping these things in mind, one will be impressed by the way Abraham Kuyper connects his profound knowledge of the Bible with everyday practical Christian life. His central concern

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding Kuyper’s references to the economists of his time, see the excellent article by Joost Hengstmengel, “The Amateur Economist: Abraham Kuyper and Economics,” also in this issue.

was to explain to his people the ways and means of piety and Christian social responsibility. Kuyper affirmed that our life and thoughts take place *coram Deo*. Therefore, his reflections “are pertinent in any age, not just the one in which Kuyper lived” (354). This beautiful anthology is enlightening for us who live more than a century after him. I wonder whether, ‘with the increasing seriousness of the times’, it will be all the more so.

## References

Kuyper, A. 1879. *Ons Program*. Amsterdam: Kruyt.

Robinson, Marilynne. 2018. *What Are We Doing Here? Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.