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DATES:

Published: 22 August 2022

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:Bishop, S., 2022. Abraham Kuyper and evolution. KOERS — Bulletin for Christian Scholarship, 87(1). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.19108/KOERS.87.1.2510>**COPYRIGHT:**

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Abraham Kuyper and evolution

ABSTRACT

This paper explores Kuyper's approach to evolution and evolutionism. He was opposed to evolutionism as it has roots in monism and pantheism; it promotes atheism. However, he did leave the way open to support some form of evolution that was guided by God and not random chance.

Keywords: Kuyper, science, evolution, common grace, sphere sovereignty

1. INTRODUCTION

Elsewhere (Bishop, 2021) I have discussed Abraham Kuyper's views on the natural sciences. Here I will focus on Kuyper's views on evolution.

In brief Kuyper's approach to the natural sciences could be summarised thus: science flourishes with society, it grows and develops, and it is by design a unique creature of God. It is part of creation, so even if there was no fall, we would still have the sciences. The fall, however, has affected the sciences. Science is independent of both church and state, the sciences must be allowed to flourish unhampered by both. Science, for Kuyper, involves thinking God's thoughts after him. There is an antithesis at work in the sciences as there are two kinds of science and two kinds of people: normalists and abnormalists – what makes the difference is a "spiritual rebirth" or *palingenesis*. Common grace is important for the sciences without it the post-fall decline of science would be absolute (for further discussion on this see Bishop, 2021).¹

Kuyper was not a scientist, at least as we understand the term scientist today; he did in various places write about the sciences.² This is not surprising as evolution was becoming an all-embracing worldview. Darwin's *On The Origin of the Species* has not long been published (1859) and Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) and Herbert Spencer (1820– 1903) among others were applying Darwin's ideas to society, a project that became known as Social Darwinism. Kuyper specifically dealt with both the scientific theory of evolution and the worldview of evolution – he designated the latter by the term evolutionism – in his "Evolution" speech at the Free University, Amsterdam (now known as the VU Amsterdam).

1 Others have dealt with Kuyper's views on science. These include van Woudenberg, 1999; Dooyeweerd, 2013; Ratzsch, 2013; Klapwijk, 2013a; Anderson, 2003.

2 One of his Stone Lectures was on science and several chapters in his *Common Grace* volume 3 dealt with it and his *Principles of Sacred Theology* - written to establish theology as one of the sciences – examined the organism of science.

2. “EVOLUTION”

Kuyper directly addressed evolution in his 1899 rectoral address to the VU Amsterdam. He begins this speech with these words: “Our nineteenth century is dying away under the hypnosis of the dogma of Evolution”. He seemingly leaves us in no doubt as to where he stands.

In *The Blind Watchmaker*, the fundamentalist atheist, Richard Dawkins wrote: “Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist”. Kuyper saw this well before Dawkins. He realised that the roots or presuppositions of evolution were monism and atheism. The only difference between Dawkins and Kuyper was that Dawkins was an atheist, Kuyper was certainly not.

In his “Evolution” speech Kuyper continues:

The dogma of evolution appeared with the pretension that, by means of its monistic mechanics, it could explain the entire cosmos, including all life processes within that cosmos, to the very earliest origins (AK:ACR, 405).

And perhaps even more forcefully: “Christian religion and the theory of evolution are two mutually exclusive systems”. Dawkins would agree – but for very different reasons!

Evolutionism arises out of monism and leads to atheism, insists Kuyper:

Its theory of evolution, as though all human life should have arisen automatically from cells and atoms apart from any higher ordination, leads directly to atheism, destroys the creation made by God’s almighty power, and denies that we were formed according to the image of God, and along with that, the highest value of our being human. By means of this foundational theory, natural science dominates every other discipline now, and aligns itself in principle polemically against every Christian confession (W&W/CG3).

There are several reasons why Kuyper takes issue with evolution. Not least the monistic presuppositions. It provides an alternative worldview that attempts to usurp Christianity. As Kuyper writes:

To explain all that exists – in its origin, being, transformation, and functions – from a single principle was the richest and most absolute Monism, in which our thinking spirit could at last find the rest it so passionately desired (AK:ACR, 423).

In his “Blurring of the boundaries” he associates it with pantheism and then atheism:

What else is the Evolution-theory but the application of the pantheistic process to the empirical investigation of the phenomena? (AK:ACR, 375).

To probe the real motive even more reply: in the theory of evolution as in pantheism generally there lurks the desire of the human heart to rid itself of God” (AK:ACR, 377)

Pantheism is a form of monism – there is just one substance.

Kuyper mentions, in “Evolution”, the increasing militarisation of nation states and the increased aggression – this he sees is encouraged by evolution, “the struggle for life, encourages this usurpation of power”. Nietzsche’s “super-race” is a logical consequence of such a view. Thus, he rejects evolution on moral grounds – it provides no basis for morality.

He also disagrees with it as it has no focus or aim, it is a chance process, and this is in complete contrast to the providence and election of God. Evolution: "... denies all pre-formation, that is, any governance-by-plan over the building of life" (AK:ACR, 414). So:

One need no longer be concerned with God's influence, with direction by a guiding principle, or with the imposition of control by any plan or purpose (AK:ACR, 421).

This is in direct conflict with the Christian world-and-life-view.

He disputes the logic and circular reasoning of inferring human development from animal development (AK:ACR, 417).

The distinction between living and non-living is conflated in evolution. The living arises out of the non-living in a *mechanistic* way. This mechanistic approach is key to evolution. Kuyper calls this into question as it also conflicts with the purposefulness of God and his organic view of creation. He also maintains that "strict Mechanism as well as strict Monism prove to be a figment of the imagination". This is because an organic factor – required within heredity - is needed alongside. This according to Kuyper is the mechanism's Achilles' heel (AK:ACR, 425-427).

Kuyper accepts the notion of adaptation and the effectiveness of selective breeding: "Transformation by artificial breeding is a fact" (AK:ACR, 421). However, it does not support evolution:

...the theory of evolution cannot gather the least support from artificial breeding. For evolution does *not* say that the species is variegated *within its own limits* but that one species changes into another (AK:ACR, 429).

Kuyper also asserts that evolution is "embarrassed by the fossil record".

On the one hand, Kuyper welcomes some aspects of the theory of evolution including:

- It is a bold reaction against the clumsy detail-empiricism ..." (AK:ACR, 429)
- It has opened questions concerning the origin of the organic world
- It has stimulated "careful observation of nature"
- It has discovered "a unity in the design of all life" (AK:ACR, 429).

On the other hand, he identifies the following flaws:

- It resorts to metaphysical speculations. It "fancies it has found *the* solution to the riddle of the universe" and provides a "cosmos without blueprint" (AK:ACR, 430)

There is no satisfactory proof that the cosmos is. This mechanistically self-formed, and the proof cannot be supplied, even experimentally, in step-by-step detail (AK:ACR, 430).

- It has become a "real *dogma*" a "*pseudo-dogma*, because the authority that can establish it is totally lacking on scientific grounds" (AK:ACR, 431).

Kuyper moves on, after discussing the scientific flaws, to examine evolution from a "*spiritual standpoint*" (AK:ACR, 431 – italics are Kuyper's). He examines how evolution theory affects "*aesthetic, ethical and religious life*" (AK:ACR, 431).

The *aesthetically beautiful*, Kuyper insists, is a "dangerous reef" for evolution. As beauty cannot be explained by utility or a mechanistic selection process. Similarly with *ethics*. The

evolutionist must explain ethics without recourse to norms or a teleological tendency. A mechanistic, accident approach cannot help us make ethical decisions. Ethics becomes a might is right, or what helps us survive must be the right approach. Such an approach cannot explain altruism. Kuyper, using an apposite metaphor, writes:

The names of psychology and ethics continue to appear as labels on the signboard, but all the drawers and closets in the shop where the ethical ingredients ought to be laid out ready for use are bare and empty (AK:ACR, 434).

Accordingly, the moral ideal, the moral world order, the moral law that governs us, the sense of duty that binds us to that law, and the Holy One who gives us the law all fall away, and with these basic ideas we lose the correlate ideas of sin, guilt and repentance (AK:ACR, 434).

An ethical development can never be deduced from the theory of Evolution except as an accidental result of uncontrolled adaptation (AK:ACR, 434).

In the critique of religion, he notes the different attitudes between the English and German adherents of evolution towards religion. The English are happy to attend the “polychromatic Church of England”, the Germans “like to wound pious feelings” (AK:ACR, 435). The Germans according to Kuyper are being more consistent with evolutionary principles.

The theory of Evolution considers an independently existing spirit to be a piece of nonsense. Thus in principle it *must* oppose the existence of angels, the existence of the soul, but then too the existence of a God (AK:ACR, 435).

He continues:

Why not be honest, have the courage of one’s conviction, and frankly admit that Evolution is not only atheistic, but anti-theistic and would ban religion as human self-deceit (AK:ACR, 435).

At least Richard Dawkins is consistent in doing this!

3. EVALUATION

Kuyper was vehemently opposed to evolutionism, particularly in the form of Social Darwinism, but seemed to permit, *if* evidence was forthcoming, some form of evolution. He described his approach as evolutionary creation. This he thought could be compatible with the providence of God as it would be possible for God to direct and shape the evolutionary approach should he so wish. Thus, without accepting the worldview associated with evolution Kuyper kept the door ajar for a form of it should the scientific evidence be forthcoming.

Had it thus pleased God not to create the species but to have one species emerge from another by enabling a preceding species to produce a higher following species, Creation would still be no less miraculous (AK:ACR, 436-437).

He describes a possible view as “Evolutionistic creation” or as a “relative evolution” (LoC, 132). The difference between this and Darwinism is in what they presuppose: “a God who prepares the plan and then omnipotently executes it” or “a mechanistic origin of things” (AK:ACR, 437).

Kuyper sees evolution as “a newly formed dogma, a newly emerged faith” (AK:ACR, 439). Unfortunately, Kuyper uses the same term to describes two aspects of evolution: the worldview and the scientific theory. He is scathing about the former but appears to leave open the possibility of the latter. The validity of such an evolutionary approach, however,

rests in the need for further scientific evidence. Kuyper sees the role of science as being limited, it does not and cannot provide a complete worldview. This is well beyond the rightful creational domain of science.

Surprisingly, Kuyper doesn't discuss Genesis 1-3 in relation to evolution, nor does he discuss the age of the Earth. Neither is he concerned with what has traditionally been described as "apologetics". Rather, what he does is look at the worldview that it promotes. It is based on this that he rejects evolutionism. Not because of the conflict (apparent or otherwise) between science and Genesis. He does, however, have this to say:

the scriptural document of Creation eliminates, rather than commending, the dramatic entry of new beings. Scripture states that "the earth brought forth herb yielding seed after its kind," and also that "the earth brought forth the cattle and everything that creepeth upon the earth"; not that they were set down upon the earth by God, like pieces upon a chessboard (AK:CR, 438).

Evolutionists and anti-evolutionists claim Kuyper's support

Both evolutionists and anti-evolutionists have claimed support from Kuyper. The American creationists Henry M. Morris (1889-1961) wrote a preface for the Dutch translation of *The Twilight of Evolution* (Morris, 1963), in which he complained of the influence of evolutionism among Dutch Calvinists, "who, in a previous generation, had known such faithful men as Abraham Kuyper and G. Ch. Aalders" (Cited in Filpse, 2012: 138).³

In 1952, the biologist Jan Lever (1922-2010) joined the faculty of the VU University. In his inaugural lecture, he presented his belief in God's creation with the evolutionary process as the means by which God created. He developed this further in his book *Creation and Evolution* (1956 - English translation 1958). In this, he insisted that belief in a God who guided evolution was not incompatible with the providence of God. His view was one of a "divine evolutionistic creation".⁴ This he maintained was consistent with Kuyper's views as expounded in Kuyper's "Evolution" address.

True to science and to scripture

Kuyper wanted to be true to the scriptures and true to biological research. He saw no conflict between the two. However, he took issue with the overstepping of evolution into evolutionism. He saved his polemics for evolutionism. As Heslam puts it Kuyper "reject[ed] evolution as a worldview, he accepted it as a scientific hypothesis, conceived using fallible human reason" (Heslam, 1999:8).

Debate was almost impossible because of the different starting positions or presuppositions. Advocates of evolutionism held to a normalist view of creation, Kuyper to an abnormalist view. Evolution as a worldview was totally incompatible with the Christian faith.

The theory of evolution imagines that it can do this now with respect to origins, but this is nothing less than self-deception, for it traces things back to the first atoms and the energy they contained, but of the origin of these (W&W, 71).

3 H. M. Morris, *De evolutieleer. Een theorie op haar retour* (Groningen: De Vuurbaak, [1969]), 7: 'in de kerken, die in een vorige generatie zulke getrouwen als Abraham Kuyper en G.Ch. Aalders hebben gekend.'

4 On Lever see Cook and Filpse (2017) and van der Walt (2016c).

The geologist Clarence Menninga discusses Kuyper's "Evolution" speech (Menninga, 2013). He identifies several areas in which Kuyper's ideas have been superseded by more recent developments particularly in the area of genetics and DNA. For instance, the propagation of characteristics from parents to offspring can now be understood in terms of genetics. Though Menninga, perhaps slightly overstates the case by saying that "these objections have been answered by our present understanding of genetics" (Menninga, 2013:345). Menninga does make a good point:

The absence of explicit mention of God's purpose in Darwin's scientific theory of evolution does not mean that the theory is incompatible with the Christian doctrine of creation; it means that the scientific theories are an incomplete explanation of reality (Menninga, 2013:347).

There may be more evidence for organic-to-organic adaption, but, at present, there is no evidence for inorganic to organic development. In this Kuyper is still correct: of the origin of "atoms and energy it can tell us nothing. It thus shifts the question without answering it" (W&W, 71). Though he was perhaps overstating his case when he claimed in his rectorial address that evolution is an "even deadlier danger" than the subjects of his previous rectorial addresses on higher criticism and pantheism.

4. CONCLUSION

Kuyper maintains the important distinction between evolution and evolutionism – that is, that evolution is a worldview. He sees the dangers inherent within evolutionism. What Kuyper does do is cover some of the scientific ideas, though but he primarily seeks to get to the roots of the issue. He identifies the worldview that lies behind evolutionism. For Kuyper, that worldview is a monistic pantheism and as such is incompatible with the Christian faith.

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