

ABRAHAM KUYPER'S CHRISTIAN ADVICE FOR FOREIGN POLICY

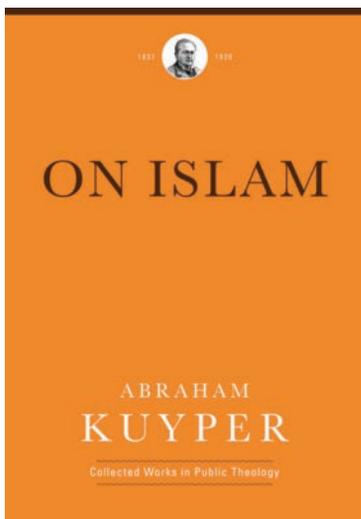
Review by Tim Scheiderer

ON ISLAM

ABRAHAM KUYPER, Lexham Press, 2018, 400 pages.



A mosque on the principal street in Kairwan, Tunisia, by Photochrom Print Collection, 1899. Source: Library of Congress.



In our day, Islam, a religion that arose from the same soil as Christianity, impacts trade, foreign relations, community relations, and national security. While both religions originated in the same region, Islam grew mostly in the East while Christianity grew mostly in the West. This regional distinction

explains the different mindset and worldview among Muslim peoples and nations. The West barely knows what Islam is or how it came to be. Current affairs, Islamism, prejudice, and political correctness make it difficult to understand the true nature of Islam. Seeing the religion from a perspective outside our current cultural context would be most helpful and is now possible.

In the book *On Islam*, the Acton Institute has translated into English for the first time portions from Abraham Kuyper's larger work, *Om de Oude Wereldzee (Around the Old World-Sea)*. The two-volume set was originally published in 1907 and 1908. In the translated excerpts, the Dutch Presbyterian theologian and politician provides meticulous details, keen observations, and insightful analysis about the Muslims' lands and culture as well as Islam's core and numerous outworkings. His unvarnished

honesty is refreshing. In certain passages, he praises an aspect of Islam. Then in the next paragraph, he critiques a different portion of it without partisanship, passivism, or animus. To have critiqued Islam in such a manner would have not served him well. In addition to fulfilling a lifelong goal of visiting this region of the world, Kuyper was striving to understand Islam because of its "growing influence" in the Dutch East Indies. In his time, the European powers saw a danger rising in the East, and the Dutch archipelago would be a strategic area if conflict ensued.

One of the dangers was Japan, which had just defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, displaying "unprecedented mastery." The victory "sent a shockwave through the heart of everything Asian, awakening a spirit of high expectations" for this was the first time an Asian power had defeated a European power in modern times. No longer did the East feel inferior to the West. In fact, it was equal in some aspects and superior in others. This newfound geopolitical equality was "frightening" to Europeans. Couple this new regional self-esteem with a growing "anti-colonial political attitude" (Pan-Islamism), and the West feared the "lion-like courage" of Muslims in the Levant and North Africa joining forces with the newly-emboldened Easterners.

In addition to two chapters specifically addressing Islam, *On Islam* includes seven chapters of Kuyper's travel notes about

six countries, two regions, and the city Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul). These chapters are fascinating as Kuyper meticulously relays details about an area's distinctiveness, geography, varied cultural expressions, government, religious infighting (as in Syria), or urban decay (as in Spain). He also discusses the impact of European imperialism on the lands of Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco. And he dives deep into the union of Islamic doctrine and governance in his writings on Sudan. When writing about the Holy Land, Kuyper speaks of having a "floor" where his "imagination [was able to] set things down."

One also learns about Kuyper's enjoyment of finer things or his disappointment due to their absence. His comments regarding his regional transportation and accommodations fit the mold of Google reviews. For instance, when traveling in Asia Minor, he recounts having to ride in an *open* carriage. Then he was delayed 45 minutes at the bridge over Golden Horn, in the "cold night air" no less. But thankfully his next mode of transportation, a lounge car, was "beautifully appointed." Upon arriving at his destination, he stayed at a small hotel that was "nothing special, but certainly civil." He warns, though, of the "swarm[ing]...merchants in the refreshments area."

In many of the places he visited, Kuyper buzzed like a bee around a flower exploring Islam's varied aspects and its cultural interpretations. He shares his experience of hearing a "captivating and lively" sermon in a mosque. He details attending a meeting of mystic Muslims and how and why this had somewhat rescued a religion drowning in legalism. He speaks of the devaluing of women in Islam, especially the disastrous effects of polygamy.

Kuyper also explains to his readers Islam's origins and emphasis on monotheism, and how its natural outworking is *jihad*. When it comes to Islam's core, the Five Pillars, his analysis is fascinating as he explains their significant deficiency, the inability to transform or elevate life. Just as fascinating is a section about the origin of the conservative character of Islam.

In light of possible conflict, Kuyper sees a need and opportunity for a mutual exchange of strengths between the West and the East. He remarks that "we must give up the notion that we have everything to bring to the East and nothing to receive." The Easterner in the Levant possesses "a treasure of warmth that should be appreciated, respected and not suppressed." This treasure partially consists of "deep empathy," calmly pondering things, the gentle unfolding of "the mysteries of the heart," and a "content state of mind." Kuyper contends our intellectual unrest (an unabated intellectual conquest of new discoveries, next levels, and nature) should not interfere with these. "To imagine that we in the West hold everything needed for the happiness of the Middle East is a proud delusion," he declares.

The West's air of superiority was a great obstacle to relations between the two groups. "Animosity against the Christian powers," he writes, "[was] the predominant Muslim mood." And mistreatment by Europe was "diminishing its opportunities for the future." As a result, "political despondency" had set in. Kuyper says "courtesy and kindness would soften their mood considerably." For him, these two traits are important pillars of diplomacy. And these pillars were the philosophical bedrock of Kuyper's political party, the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP). Regarding colonial rule, the ARP did not view the Dutch

colonies as suppliers of goods and resources, but as a God-given opportunity to improve lives with the expertise and resources of the state.

Article 18 of the Anti-Revolutionary Party's *Program* states that "the selfish tendency of our policy to exploit the colonies for public revenue or private profit ought to be replaced by a policy of moral obligation."

Moral obligation is not a core component of current American foreign policy. It is not found to be the dominating theme in the press briefing room of the State Department. Current policy discussions are steered by pragmatism for our profit, not service for others' profit. Doing something for one's own profit at the expense of others is seen as having a sense of superiority. And as Kuyper writes, this is ultimately unproductive. The exploitation of land, resources, partnerships, etc. breeds contempt and hostility. Over and again, citizens and governments of other countries have heard that our diplomatic efforts are dictated by one phrase, "what is in America's best interests." How powerful would it be for the world to hear the US Secretary of State declare that current relations with country X would move forward in that country's best interests?

For instance, Kuyper approaches relations with the Dutch colony, the East Indies, as a guardian and not an imperialist. He believes the Netherlands should be present in the area for a definite, not indefinite, period of time in order to help the country succeed. He says the help should come in the form of providing a moral education, wisely managing the country's estate, and advancing greater independence. Imagine if the US government began focusing its vast resources on a certain Muslim-majority country for an extended period of time to help it come into the twenty-first century. The



Constantinople, by Detroit Publishing Co, circa 1900.
Source: Library of Congress.

strategy could be comprised of the goals set forth by Kuyper to benefit all of the country's citizens. Of course, the goals would need to be modified appropriately for each particular country, but the desired end result would be a better economy, fewer tribal feuds, better governance, and a modernized infrastructure. All could be done without any hint of *quid pro quo*. Relations with these countries would improve, and the impact long term could be significant in a number of areas.

This type of diplomacy cannot come, however, from those with a sense of superiority. Those who consider themselves superior would likely think this strategy foolish. For them, there is no return on investment. There is no advantage gained. This courtesy, this kindness only flows from humility. This is the trait coloring all of Kuyper's suggestions as to how the Netherlands should interact with the East. He speaks of learning from their "treasure of warmth" that the West should embrace. This must be welcomed with humility. He also writes of permitting the East to use Western resources for a better economy in their own "form" and not imposing assimilation of the West's form. This willingness is only born of humility. These are just a couple of the examples he mentions.

Since these policy suggestions are rooted in humility, it is crucial to know where the humility

itself is rooted. It is rooted in the doctrine of Christ. In him, the example is clear of one superior exercising humility for the benefit of others. His humility comes without expectations or stipulations. As the Apostle Paul writes, "[Christ] emptied himself,

by taking the *form* of a servant... in human *form*, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death" (Phil. 2:7-8, emphasis added). Christ's form is most significant. He did not relate to mankind in his heavenly form. This would have disrupted the relatability he was striving to accomplish. Hence, the environment in which humility operated eliminated unnecessary barriers and was the most conducive for possible reception. And just the same, humility also enabled him to be aware of the needed change in form. In short, Christ made accommodations.

Kuyper was advocating for the same idea, making accommodations, when dealing with the East and the development of its economy. The West would provide financial support and infrastructure resources, permitting the East to use them in their existing culture, in their form. If they were open to changing their culture, additional resources could be provided, especially those that provided a moral education and expanded upon "greater independence." But Kuyper was against forced change, i.e., colonization. In our day, one example of forced change would be the democratization of a country's government. If desired, the country should be permitted to remain in its indigenous structural, political, and communal culture and be elevated economically with assistance from

the West. Humility makes this permissiveness possible.

Would this strategy appeal to secularists in government? Yes. Even though the strategy is built on Christian truth, there are several pragmatic byproducts of it. One benefit is it would boost the image of the United States as a neighbor and not as an enemy, thereby taking a recruiting tool away from terrorists. It could also assist in improving relations with other Muslim-majority countries where the program was not employed. Finally, it would be a humanitarian project on a grand scale that would greatly benefit many women and children.

For Kuyper, governance is an opportunity to plant Christian truth in another part of the world's soil. It is about giving others a chance to flourish. In his travels, he realized the West, with all of its affluence and modern advancements, lacked a certain aspect of flourishing: "Let us reach for the higher ideal of enriching the East with our intellectual, technical, and artistic treasures while, in turn, warming our mentality, withered by skepticism, with their more intensive inner life. And so may a higher harmony of life emerge as the spirits of East and West are brought into a better balance and unity."

Kuyper may seem anachronistic to the American Christian of today because it appears he has given Islam too much credit. He has praised it to the point of almost legitimizing it in an unhealthy manner. That would be the adolescence of the present expressing its self-sufficiency again. Our future would be better if we learn from the past contained in *On Islam*. ■

Tim Scheiderer is the editor of *The St. Charles Institute*. The former journalist holds an MDiv from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.