

THE SOCIETY
“FOR THE
COMMON
GOOD”

TEXT INTRODUCTION

On January 25, 1869, in the midst of an intense ecclesiastical struggle in the Dutch Reformed Church of Utrecht, to which he had been called in the summer of 1867, Abraham Kuyper traveled to Amsterdam and addressed a promotional rally for Christian education. His topic: “The ‘Common Good’ Movement” (“*De ‘Nuts’-Beweging*”). An expanded version of the address came out a month later in an eighty-three-page pamphlet that significantly stoked the fires of the school struggle about the role of religion in Dutch public schools.

The target of Kuyper’s polemic was *De Maatschappij “Tot Nut van ‘t Algemeen”* (that is, the Society “for the Common Good”). This was the primary nongovernment organization devoted to the improvement of education for Dutch children. Established in 1784 with the goal of bringing people of all religions together for the improvement of the “rational, moral and social conditions of the people, especially by exerting influence in the area of nurture and education,” the society established chapters throughout the Netherlands and became an important player in the development of a national school system. By the time Kuyper delivered his address in 1869, the society had also become more aggressive in its promotion of a kind of secular neutrality in Dutch public education; the religious neutrality, prescribed by law, was being used to create room for an antireligious spirit.

Kuyper’s polemic against the society was occasioned by a manifesto recently issued by its board of directors that described the movement for free, private elementary schools as a threat to the progressive well-being

of the Dutch nation. Kuyper opens his critique with a lengthy citation from the manifesto.

This was not Kuyper's first encounter with the society. Only two years earlier, it looked more positive. As a minister in the Reformed Church of Beesd, Kuyper had been elected to serve on the board of a local chapter of the society for promoting community banking. But he had soon resigned, for reasons that are not entirely clear.

In the summary that follows, the dominant voice is Kuyper's own, although mostly paraphrased. A minimum of actual excerpts from the pamphlet are reproduced, for which page references are provided in parentheses. The result powerfully captures, at times with biting sarcasm, Kuyper's argument against the Society's advocacy of *education without religion* as a "common good" for the Dutch people.

Source: Kuyper, Abraham. *De "Nuts"-Beweging*. Amsterdam: H. Höveker, 1869. Translated, abridged, summarized, and annotated by John Bolt. Edited by Harry Van Dyke.

THE SOCIETY “FOR THE COMMON GOOD”

On November 8, 1868, the board of directors of the Society for the Common Good issued a manifesto to its local chapters about what it perceived as a threat to the public good in the arena of public education.¹ After reminding its members that improving Dutch public schools was one of the prime objectives of the society’s founding, it observes that significant progress has been achieved, notably in religious tolerance. The Dutch nation, the manifesto notes, is a “free nation, which from of old has been a refuge for all those who were persecuted for their beliefs and convictions” (2). And now the schools, in large measure thanks to the dedicated work of the society, have arrived at the point where the present generation is being educated and formed so that all can live together in brotherly love. In spite of ecclesiastical and doctrinal differences, the nation has come to understand that “the law of mutual love is the first and highest law there is” (2).

But now there is a perceived threat to this progressive ambition. There are disturbers who “from many sides [are] trying to undo the beneficial fruit [that has been achieved] in the past” (2). The manifesto expresses deep concern that an “ecclesiastical movement” has revealed itself as opposed to

1. The contents of the paragraphs that immediately follow are paraphrased from the society’s manifesto.

the religious neutrality of the public school. This is an effort to take back the gains that our nation, more than others, has enjoyed for more than sixty years.² In spite of the fact that the rights of our schools are constitutionally protected, that their beneficial fruits for a growing number are demonstrable, and that school authorities are always ready to listen to concerns about one-sided instruction, nevertheless, “seeds of resentment and discontent have been sown precisely in those places where sympathy and gratitude should prevail” (2). As these voices grow louder and louder, enlightened Netherlanders stand in danger of being robbed of that which is essential for the well-being of our children and the future of our nation. While their ability to attack is weak, their battle cry is loud and noisy.

We, the Board of Governors, regard this as a matter of grave concern and urge our members to be “vigilant” and to “keep a watchful eye on the forces which, however at odds they may be with one another, are nevertheless for the time being arrayed against the existence and flourishing of our present order, an order that is correctly seen as an essential condition for a united and independent Netherlands” (3). No upright Dutchman can look on this and remain indifferent; we in the society have struggled too long and too hard to bring about this order, and our efforts have garnered the sympathy of the nation and earned the tribute of all Europe.

We therefore call on our members to be awake and alert and to stand fast against those who would reverse the progress we have made in the elevation of all classes. If the thousands of our members remain firm, we can achieve an even greater harvest along with other enlightened [lit. “awakened”] people in our civilized world today. Let us strive to make our nation’s schools even better and closer to the ideal we set for them. For eighty years our society has fought for our nation’s welfare and culture, for civilizing our people; we remain committed to our conviction that a properly oriented school is essential for our nation’s greatness. We call on our members and chapters to make our manifesto known, to zealously fight to preserve the gains we have achieved, and to resist those who would undermine them.³

2. Reference to the Education Act of 1806.

3. What now follows is Kuyper’s response to the manifesto.

The subject of this manifesto is the neutral public school for which the society takes credit. Notice that this school is credited for making the Netherlands a free and tolerant nation, one in which ecclesiastical differences have been set aside by love. However, the manifesto claims at the same time that our nation has “from of old been a refuge for all those who were persecuted for their beliefs and convictions.” On what basis, pray tell, can the society claim credit for what has been our nation’s patrimony “from of old” (4-5)?

The society violates the very principle it celebrates when it speaks of our opposition to the direction of the public school as “ecclesiastical.” It is of course more than that, but granting the premise for the moment, we run up against article 3 of the Elementary Education Act of 1857 that forbids taking sides in the struggle between church and state.⁴ It is simply not true that we are trying to diminish the availability of schooling for all Dutch children. On the contrary, we seek to make it possible for more children to receive the religious education desired by their parents. We are told that we are fools who refuse to bring our grievances to the authorities who are always more than willing to listen to legitimate complaints. This simply misses the point. For us the issue was never about instances when the law was infringed⁵ but about the law itself, because its demand of neutrality so grievously violates the conscience of many (5-7). The use of the term “ecclesiastical” reflects the problem that the society has with our movement. They cannot acknowledge that our movement is national because it would put the lie to their claim that support for a neutral school is generally accepted by Dutch citizens and therefore truly national. If they ignore us, the risk is that our movement grows; if they pay us too much attention, their premise that they represent the national will is not warranted. Therefore we get dismissed as “ecclesiastical” and as “fools.”

4. Kuyper refers to article 3 of the Education Act later on (p. 11), where he observes that although the Society considers a “ban on participating in party strife” to be one of its chief dogmas, the manifesto is guilty of that very sin.

5. In certain regions of the country, authorities turned a blind eye if teachers made use of the Bible, in contravention of the spirit of the Education Act but for the purpose of placating parents, who then might conclude that the common public school was “Christian enough.”

But even worse, those of us who object to the law are not only fools but said to be evil people. While the society sowed seeds of tolerance and love in the field of national education, we protesters are the enemy who sow bad seed among the good with the intention of destroying the harvest of good will and national progress. We are judged to be sinners sowing resentment and discontent in place of sympathy and gratitude and therefore not true, upright Netherlanders who love the Fatherland.

So much for the society's gospel of tolerance for all views. The lofty virtue of neutrality so important to its members flies out the window when it comes to those who oppose the neutrality of the schools. About such opposition one cannot be neutral, because such neutrality would be suicidal for the well-being of Dutch society.

It is a shame that humility is not one of the virtues that the Society wants taught in our national schools. Self-proclamations about earning "tribute from all Europe" strike us as a little too proud, not to mention instances of high-blown, empty rhetoric. To top it all off, the manifesto goes on to speak of "awakened" [enlightened] people who support neutral schools. Are they implying that those who do not are asleep (8-9)?

The members of the society are asked to mobilize against us under the banner "For the well-being of our people via civilizing work" by means of "supporting the neutral school with an energy that matches the energy we have seen in those who seek to undermine it" (10).

The above is sufficient to capture the rhetorical character of Kuyper's polemic against the Society "for the Common Good." As he goes on to provide further analysis, however, he does not continue solely in this vein but also introduces some appreciative notes. He praises them for their passion and for living out their convictions (9). He then reveals his own twofold intention in engaging the manifesto:

1. He wants to show how the manifesto has unmasked the myth of neutrality. The moment opposition arises, neutrality vanishes for those who are committed to neutrality and fiercely opposed to "party spirit"; instead, at that moment they become fiercely partisan. This is a welcome revelation.
2. Kuyper notes that an analysis such as he has given is necessary to enable people to see behind the curtain of politeness that hides the manifesto's true agenda (11). He wants to alert people who may have been longtime supporters of the society that it is no

longer the organization it was in the past. The manifesto is a “declaration of war” against those who desire free schools (15).

Historically, however, Kuyper acknowledges the Christian consciousness that gave rise to the society in the late eighteenth century, a dark time in the Netherlands, a time of spiritual poverty in the midst of material plenty for a few. Kuyper praises the founders of the society for the genuine concern manifested toward the lower classes and the improvement of their lot through education. In spite of what the society has become, he does not hesitate to pronounce a blessing on its founding. In a key passage he describes the horrible condition of schools and compares it with what the society has achieved:

For the first time education became education and since then there is a leading concern to connect with the life of the people. There is a growing conviction that the school exists for children and not children for the school. ... Musty hovels were replaced by brighter and larger spaces. ... Teachers’ private family lives were now kept distinct from the classroom. ... A general educational method was developed. ... Improvement took place in teacher training and in textbooks. ... Drilling was replaced by more mature forms of discipline. ... Teachers came to be regarded as professionals. (25–27)

That is why the society enjoyed impressive growth and connected with the instinctive and national life of Netherlanders. Praiseworthy is its decentralized structure and the expectation from all members to participate sacrificially in its work. In all this one finds something authentically Dutch (29–36). At a time when the spirit of the nation was at a low ebb, the founding of the society helped lift it out of the moral doldrums. Also, its success points to the failure of the Dutch Reformed Church, a failure in the humiliating consequences of which one can see the hand of God’s righteous judgment (37).

But was it Christian in its orientation or was it, as it is now, hostile to the Christian faith? We need to give different answers to that question, depending on the various periods of its history. Its founder, Mennonite pastor Jan Nieuwenhuyzen, clearly had a Christian heart but stood opposed to all forms of a Christian society and had no eye for the positive, renewing life-force of a Christianized culture. In Nieuwenhuyzen’s day people

still believed in revelation, in miracles, in the mystery of the atonement, but these convictions were taken for granted rather than passionately defended. The society tailored its religious dimension to the worst features of Dutch character—superficiality and moral indifference. In its initial phase, the society possessed a Christian tint but lacked the power of a thoroughly Christian vision for society.⁶ The current that was hostile to Christianity soon turned into a colorless natural religion, with the essence of Christianity diminished to a simple Mosaic injunction, “Love God above all, and your neighbor as yourself,” diluted in meaning to “universal love of man, plus love of the Supreme Being.” The practice of virtue guarantees salvation; there is no sense of sin, nor of guilt (46). The society’s ideal is a colorless religion that satisfies everyone and offends no one; an impossible general Christianity that transcends all particular religious divisions, a confession beyond all confessions (40–42).

The goal here is to eliminate particular confessions from public life, all in the name of tolerance. The tactics that once were used to suppress dissent in our nation’s public schools are now proposed for our religious lives as well. Forbid alternative schools by law, and eventually there won’t be any left. Discourage all expression of religious differences and so bolster unity and tolerance. In this way all thought will be suppressed, all conflict eliminated. Blow out the spark of life, and the struggle of life is eliminated. Then we will have tolerance all right, but a tolerance of indifference, of superficiality, of complete loss of principles. This tolerance spreads further and further, establishing its moving boundaries but becoming fanatic in its zealotry the moment a form of faith dares raise its head. “Over against the dogma of the society—‘tolerance through giving up religious distinctions’—I do not hesitate to posit another proposition: ‘respect for the convictions of others precisely by remaining firm in one’s own convictions’” (43–45).⁷

But our critique cannot stop here.⁸ No longer content to replace particular confessions with a generic Christianity that borrowed heavily from so-called natural religion, the society has in recent years undergone a complete metamorphosis and become aggressively modernist in its convictions.

6. On p. 57, Kuyper speaks of this first period of the Society (roughly 1784–1830) as “tinted by Christianity” (lit. Christianly colored).

7. On p. 57 Kuyper refers to this second period of the Society’s history (1830–67) as “colorless.”

8. Kuyper now starts to discuss the Society’s final period (1867 to the present), which he calls “de-Christianized” or what we might call “secular.”

This triumph of modernism (that is, theological liberalism) parallels that which took place in the Dutch Reformed Church. The result is that though the society claims to be neutral when it comes to conflicts in the church, writers in its annual Almanac advocate, "as with a single stroke of the pen," a view of history that "denies the possibility of miracles, repudiates the Bible and its portrayal of Israel's history, and destroys the church's faith in Christ and the things to come" (68). The final proof of the society's modernism can be found in its opposition to the free-school movement. Instead of religious neutrality, the society has publicly come out in favor of a modernist interpretation of Christianity:

A brand-new difference has arisen. Indeed, every existing difference is cast into the shadow and reduced to nothing by the arrival of this powerful, dominating difference. On the one side are all the Christian confessions and, on the other side, a new school of thought that in a tone of fierce defiance throws down the gauntlet against everything that has up to now been regarded as Christian. ... Here we encounter a problem with the Education Act. It mandates a generic Christianity upon which all confessions can build. The society seeks a generic Christianity that will be opposed by every confession. (75-76)

This is nothing less than an attempt to annex the national school and turn it into a propaganda machine for modernism: "This is unjust! That is the reason for the vehement agitation about the nation's schools. The conscience of the nation properly rises up against this injustice!" (76). Kuyper ends his address:

I conclude by calling, in the name of our Lord, on all who confess Christ: Men and Brethren! Go out from a society that has declared war against everything that your soul considers holy. And to the extent that God has gifted you or provided resources, do not lend pen or word or money to such a society!

Whoever denies me before men, I shall ...

But why call to mind what pulses through the heart and conscience of every professing Christian? I will have achieved my goal if this argument contributes even a small part to making intrinsic dishonesty and utter lack of principle more hated by friend and foe alike.