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# A Christian Response to the Restrictions on Girls' Education in Afghanistan Under the Taliban Regime: How Kuyperian Insight Requires Theological and Embodied Engagement

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by Jaelyn Dragt

On December 20, 2022, the Taliban announced the closure of universities for women in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> This restriction followed the previous limits placed on girls' education since the Taliban took control of Kabul in August of 2021 and banned girls from secondary school indefinitely. Mirroring the experience of an entire generation of girls and women twenty years ago under the previous Taliban regime, the lives of Afghan girls who had the opportunity to study are again confined to the home. The voice of one young student, after one hundred and eighty-six long days outside of the classroom, poignantly cries out to anyone who will listen, "What is our crime? That we are girls?"<sup>2</sup> The voices of Afghan girls have long been silenced and their stories left untold in the chaos of a country that has been shaped by conflict and religious struggle and is currently "facing both humanitarian and human rights crises."<sup>3</sup> A month prior to the exclusion from education for half of the entire population of Afghanistan, a study from November 2022 found that Americans ranked terrorism, immigration, and drug-traffick-

ing among their top concerns for foreign policy, with "protecting human rights globally"<sup>4</sup> placed at number ten. This insight into the concerns of Americans does not necessarily exclude them from expressing outrage among the international community, yet it does provide reasons to engage the questions of why and how they should care, and particularly what the Church has to say.

For the Church in the West, theologian Timothy Tennent urges that "a truly vibrant theology cannot exist in some hermetically sealed vacuum, blissfully ignorant of the real and difficult cultural and contextual challenges of our world."<sup>5</sup> Chief among these is how a faith that upholds dignity for all human beings must respond to a context of such clear humanitarian concern. This essay will focus on Abraham Kuyper's theology as it offers insight into a Christian response to "the systematic policies of targeted discrimination put in place by the Taliban against women."<sup>6</sup> This response will require both intellectual and theological attention as it seeks to understand the issue, as well as a heart open to the pain of oppressed Afghan women and girls. To begin, we must understand the issue in Afghanistan; and to do so, we will engage a Kuyperian framework to think about it Christianly. Leaning on the insights of Matthew Kaemink on engaging Islam in the West, this essay will conclude with suggestions for how Christians outside our own context

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Jaelyn Dragt, a Dordt University junior, majoring in Social Work and Community Development and minoring in Theology, submitted this essay to the Lambertus Verburg Prize for Excellence in Kuyperian Scholarship competition, 2023.

can carry forward our theology with a compassionate response to Afghan women and girls.

The key belief in God's sovereignty, which is fundamental to the vision of life for the Reformed Christian faith, was thought about and explained extensively in the writings of Abraham Kuyper. In addressing the issue of girls being banned from education in Afghanistan, Kuyper's well-known declaration of Christ's sovereignty is applicable. Does not every "square inch" upon which our Lord claims sovereignty, as Kuyper articulated, include the empty desk of a girl's classroom in Kabul, Afghanistan too? If so, the past, the current, and the future experiences of women in Afghanistan necessarily require our careful thought, wrestling, and engagement. Far from a Christian university campus in Iowa, where students not only learn about the sovereignty of God and their calling but are also equipped to "work effectively toward Christ-centered renewal in all aspects of contemporary life,"<sup>7</sup> Afghan students, on the other side of the world, are banned from continuing their education and express their helplessness. One young woman shares, "I can't fulfill my dreams, my hopes. Everything is disappearing before my eyes, and I can't do anything about it."<sup>8</sup> The reality of the imposed restrictions upon the education of women and girls has also led to "increased risks of forced and underage marriage, violence and abuse"<sup>9</sup> and effectively confines them to "the four walls of their homes."<sup>10</sup> The United Nations has described the current situation in Afghanistan as a "grave women's rights crisis and a wakeup call for the international community," and their delegations have "called for efforts to be intensified to reflect the urgency of the crisis...and stressed the importance of a unified response by the international community."<sup>11</sup> Notably, the Malala Fund, a non-profit dedicated to investing in girls' education worldwide, explains that "Afghanistan is the only country in the world that forbids girls to go to school."<sup>12</sup> Even before the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August of 2021, "3.7 million [of their] children were out of school – most of them girls"; but after the restrictions were imposed, for secondary school alone an additional "1.2 million"<sup>13</sup> Afghan girls have been excluded from the opportunity of formal education. The reality of life for millions of Afghan girls

and women needs to be seen honestly and within the framework of the Christian understanding of Christ's sovereignty over the complex factors resulting in these empty desks.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to address the limits of this essay. In engaging with the issue of women's education in Afghanistan, the interconnectedness of religion, politics, gender, and culture that pertain to this issue deserve considerable attention. However, an analysis of the complex factors of international intervention or political action will not be extensively addressed in the scope of this paper; rather, its attention will focus on how Christians can use a theological framework to think about and engage the issue. As theologian Matthew Kaemingk emphasizes in his reflection on the words of Reformed thinker Herman Bavinck, "theology's honor is that she can serve the others with her gifts"<sup>14</sup> and can offer the truth "that Jesus Christ is the person through which all persons and events should be understood."<sup>15</sup> How might Kuyper's theology, in light of this perspective, give insight to Christians in the West as a way to humbly and compassionately approach the issue of women's education in Afghanistan and their oppression at the hands of the Taliban? This paper is offered to honor each Afghan girl and woman denied access to education and is a response to join in the "global lament"<sup>16</sup> about all the ways that their world has been controlled and their opportunities limited in these recent months. In their courage, resiliency, and the image of glory that they bear, may we wait with them in hope for their learning to be resumed, and that the world might be opened up for them again.

The complex interconnectedness of religion, politics, tradition, and culture in Afghanistan from a Kuyperian perspective must be included in the claim that "no area of human culture and society lies beyond"<sup>17</sup> the call to love for every Christian. The Reformed tradition views "human life as part of a good, broken, and yet redeemable creation,"<sup>18</sup> and it articulates that those who have "redemptive agency," namely all those who bear Christ's image, are to respond to this call. Kuyper, in his own context in the Netherlands and in his travels abroad, engaged significantly with the implications of faith in the areas of education, religion, and politics.

Kuyper described faith as “the interpretation of our relation to God which dominates every general life system,”<sup>19</sup> and he believed that the “whole of a man’s life is to be lived as in the Divine Presence.”<sup>20</sup> The decision made by the Taliban can be considered a result of their own life system, for they argue that their “rules are in keeping with their interpretation of Islam.”<sup>21</sup> These claims come from the Taliban, citing that this is what an Islamic society purified in the right way of submission to Allah requires. Their stated reasons for excluding girls from

others, which occurs in Christian faith communities, just as it does in the Islamic faith communities. In the latter case, the power of religion has implications for abuses on women’s rights and lack of dignity offered to women in Afghanistan. The evidence for this targeted use of power is recorded by the United Nations’ report that 2.5 million Afghan girls and young women are out of school, in addition to 100,000 female university students,<sup>31</sup> as a result of the Taliban’s religious claims upon what a true Islamic society should be.

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the classroom referred to “preventing the mixing of genders,”<sup>22</sup> “teaching in violation with Islamic and Afghan values,”<sup>23</sup> and the student’s “failure to observe a dress code.”<sup>24</sup>

In 1905, Kuyper traveled to several Muslim countries and observed the Islamic faith of the people, recording and reflecting on what he saw as a commitment to the teachings of Muhammad.<sup>25</sup> Muhammad is viewed by Muslims as the true and last prophet chosen by God to reveal his divine message to humankind.<sup>26</sup> In observing that Muhammad “was so deeply and idealistically consumed with the all-embracing, all-encompassing supremacy of Allah as a net over all of human existence,”<sup>27</sup> Kuyper inferred that a true expression of Islam is to shape “not just the personal but the domestic, social, and political domains of life.”<sup>28</sup> Notably, in Kuyper’s own vision for an all-encompassing system of faith, he held agreement with Mohammed, who thought that “religion as a private matter was unthinkable.”<sup>29</sup> Kuyper recognized that “religion is mightier than any other single factor in the course of our personal life and in the history of the nations because it stirs the deepest part of our being.”<sup>30</sup> Yet it is evident that with this power comes a capacity for destructive force in the lives of

Applying Kuyper’s belief that faith demands engagement in all areas of life with implications for society and culture, we see the Taliban’s actions as agreeing with this claim. An Islamic understanding of the rules that are to govern a Muslim’s life describes law, or “Sharia,” to be “more than law: it is also the right teaching, the right way to go in life, and the power that stands behind what is right.”<sup>32</sup> This thought draws parallels to Kuyper’s articulation of a life-system, in that it requires attention to our relation to God, our relation to man, and our relation to the world.<sup>33</sup> For Kuyper, however, a biblical life-system foundationally concludes that “all men or women, rich or poor, weak or strong, dull or talented, as creatures of God, and as lost sinners, have no claim whatsoever to lord over one another, and that we stand as equals before God.”<sup>34</sup> The Taliban’s ideals, as evident in denying women’s rights to education, show a hierarchal understanding of power, one that endorses the claim that men have superiority over women. For Kuyper, the work of Christ “lays full claim, not only to the believer, but to every human being and to all human relationships.”<sup>35</sup> And if this is the case, the lives of these Afghan women matter significantly as does the compassion the Church extends to them.

From this understanding, Kuyper argued that a Christian “cannot shut himself up in his church and abandon the world to its fate,”<sup>36</sup> including the parts of the world far from one’s own context and religious or cultural values. For a Christian, then, the breadth of their calling to oppose injustice can be more fully expressed when they recognize that their individual experience of life is one among many diverse contexts in the world, and that with human dignity at stake, they have a role to play. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit, Kuyper wrote, that Christians understand the higher calling for their own life—to live in “accordance with God’s ordinance, for the sake of God, upholding, in the midst of so much painful corruption, everything that is honorable, lovely, and of good report among men.”<sup>37</sup>

Kuyper upheld the belief that God has given a “divine purpose of scholarship for human culture”<sup>38</sup>; for it is in “the realm of learning and education he believed that God had granted humankind a natural curiosity about life and the ability to observe, question, experience, and discover new aspects of the way this world operates.”<sup>39</sup> The significance of education for Kuyper lies in the fact that “education touches on one of the most complicated and intricate questions, one that involves every issue, including the deepest issues that invite humanity’s search for knowledge.”<sup>40</sup> It is necessary to recognize that “the way the world operates”<sup>41</sup> is often more complex and more tragic than our experience of it in the West, the reality in Afghanistan being a primary example. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights guarantees, in article 26, that every human being has the right to education, and yet, according to UNESCO, it is estimated that worldwide “130 million” school age girls do not have access or have been denied access to education.<sup>42</sup> These statistics are staggering and go beyond the conversation of human rights; for societies and cultures do not thrive when significant numbers of their population are denied education. The UN explains that “investing in girls’ education transforms communities, countries, and the entire world,”<sup>43</sup> and when girls are educated, the result “contributes to more stable, resilient societies that give all individuals the opportunity to fulfil their potential.”<sup>44</sup>

Kuyper’s own articulation of education as “a

distinct public interest”<sup>45</sup> recognizes the potential for education in transforming individual lives and collective experiences. These insights should deepen the Christian’s understanding of the gravity of taking education away from girls and women in Afghanistan, for doing so prohibits the potential for all God’s image-bearers to flourish in the manner for which God has created them. For Christian students in North America seeking to compassionately understand and respond to the situation in Afghanistan, an acknowledgement of the privilege they enjoy in having free and safe access to education is necessary to open their hearts and minds more fully to this issue.

Contemporary theologian Matthew Kaemingk helpfully writes on a Kuyperian response to Islam in the West today; his words are profoundly relevant when we consider our thought and care for our Muslim sisters in Afghanistan also. Kaemingk reminds us that this is a complex issue from which arise a variety of questions, not only about religion but also about poverty, race, gender, sexuality, language, globalization, and more.<sup>46</sup> All Christians should heed Kaemingk’s insight that it is his faith in Jesus that creates a “bridge to the love, respect, and honor I hold for my Muslim neighbor.”<sup>47</sup> In seeking to understand our connection with those in different contexts and cultures far from our own experience of the world, Kuyper’s articulation of sovereignty is a useful vision, allowing the Church to recognize God’s ultimate authority over all of creation and humanity. Kaemingk frames Kuyper’s insistence on Christological sovereignty in “his utter refusal to grant ultimate sovereignty to any mortal institution or individual.”<sup>48</sup> This is because Kuyper recognized both that “all types of earthly authority were vulnerable to becoming corrupted”<sup>49</sup> and that ultimately “Jesus Christ alone was the true and ultimate sovereign.”<sup>50</sup> An important distinction here is made between “Christ alone—and not the Christian—”<sup>51</sup> as holding all authority. This distinction requires Christians to remember that in each context where they seek to proclaim Christ’s authority, particularly for contexts in opposition to God’s created order, they must do so with humility and discernment, following God’s ordinances rather than their own.

Another gift of Kuyper’s thinking that per-

tains to our thought around the contemporary situation in Afghanistan is “common grace,” for through this belief we are compelled to see God’s presence among the people of Afghanistan too. As Kaemingk writes, “according to Kuyper, no faith or culture had escaped the good and gracious gifts of the Holy Spirit”<sup>52</sup>; among these, the Spirit also “restrains the selfish, violent, and hegemonic temptations active within every ideological community.”<sup>53</sup> Is our vision of God’s grace wide and deep enough

manity should also increase our compassion for “all people, from all times, cultures, and faiths”<sup>57</sup> and cause us to hold onto the truth that “no amount of evil, injustice, or violence could strip human beings of the divine imagery they bore.”<sup>58</sup>

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to insist that even within a Taliban regime there can be found gifts of the Spirit? Beyond the scope of this essay, we must also consider the possibility of redemption for the Taliban and entirety of Afghanistan. Christians must trust that the Spirit is continually and mysteriously at work to “enable a people to worship God fully and completely in spirit and in truth.”<sup>54</sup> John Calvin’s words speak pointedly that there is still an individual role for each of us, for he insists that our compassion should be such that “whatever God has conferred on us, which enables us to assist our neighbour, we are the stewards of it, and must one day render an account of our stewardship; and that the only right dispensation of what has been committed to us, is that which is regulated by the law of love.”<sup>55</sup> For Calvin and for Kuyper, the Christian life requires attention to the wellbeing of all individuals in a way that often compels a laying down of our own self-interests. Further, Calvin believed that we “we must not regard the intrinsic merit of men, but must consider the image of God in them, to which we owe all possible honour and love.”<sup>56</sup> Those that bear the image of God include every woman in Afghanistan. Whether her face is concealed by a burka by choice or imposed, she too is owed honor. A Kuyperian understanding of our common hu-

Kuyper offers encouraging insight into this struggle for Christians: “God regenerates us,”<sup>59</sup> and the “necessary consequence of this regeneration is an irreconcilable conflict between the inner world of our heart and the world outside, and this conflict is ever the more intensified the more the regenerative principle pervades our consciousness.”<sup>60</sup> It is right to willingly receive this gift of conflict in one’s heart when we consider the unjustifiable difference between rights enjoyed by women in a Western context and rights denied in the current state in Afghanistan. In living “before the face of God,”<sup>61</sup> when we realize that the God whose image is found in the face of each Afghan woman is being hidden, our thoughts, hearts, and care are necessary. Further, this understanding includes the Taliban themselves, for Calvin challenged us to realize “that we must not reflect on the wickedness of men, but contemplate the Divine image in them; which, concealing and obliterating their faults, by its beauty and dignity allures us to embrace them in the arms of our love.”<sup>62</sup> This contemplation is certainly difficult when we acknowledge the implications of the actions and power of the Taliban to restrict Afghan women from education and public life. A Kuyperian framework demands this engagement, however; for it is in holding “al-

ways and in all things the deepest, the most sacred reverence for the ever-present God as the rule of life”<sup>63</sup> that we must be aware of, seek to understand, and engage with the injustices experienced by every Afghan sister and brother. For, as Kuyper argued, the Christian has a responsibility not to “rest until both politically and socially every man [or human], simply because he is man [human], should be recognized, respected, and dealt with as a creature created after the Divine likeness.”<sup>64</sup>

Though Kuyperian thought has much to offer, there are limits to the ways Kuyper’s theology can practically be engaged for the people in a country currently ruled by a Taliban regime. We need more current insights to challenge and inform Kuyper’s thought. In studying Kuyper’s lectures on life-systems, Richard Mouw offers an important nuance in answering the question *Who are we?* He states, “we are human beings of many races and ethnicities who nonetheless possess a shared dignity that is grounded in our being beloved creatures of God.”<sup>65</sup> Further, it is because of this identity that “we together face cultural forces these days that require us to reflect deeply— and act, urgently— on our convictions about our shared humanness.”<sup>66</sup> For those who theologize far removed from the realities of the lives in Afghanistan, listening to the voices of Afghan women and girls should be of great priority to further understand our “shared humanness” and call to love. Sahar Fetrat, an assistant researcher with the Human Rights Watch, says she feels “enraged when I wake up every day thinking, how is it we are fighting for something as basic as girls’ right to education in 2022?”<sup>67</sup> In our shared humanity, the Church should be compelled to embody this outrage, with attention to the pain, grief, and oppression currently experienced by Afghan girls and women. In our prayers, in our words, and in our willingness to let their stories bear consequence on our own, we can begin to engage with this issue from afar.

One such voice to attend to is that of Shaharзад Akbar, former chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, who speaks honestly and passionately on Afghan women’s rights and highlights the stories of girls in Afghanistan today. Another voice is that of Zarifa Ghafari, who was the first female mayor of

the province of Maidan Shahr, who tells her own story in her memoir, *A Woman’s Battle in a Man’s World*. Can we seek ways to recognize the depth of suffering experienced by Afghan girls and women while we also offer dignity to their cultural and religious context and the image of Christ that they bear? While thinking theologically and critically engaging with the voices of the past, how can we also engage the cries of the present? A Kuyperian theological response to the present needs, crisis, and suffering in Afghanistan needs to be grounded in “the eternal love of Christ which was, from the beginning, the moving principle of this world-order.”<sup>68</sup>

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