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Alberta's Oil Sands Boom: A Wake-up Call for Christian Scholarship?



by John Hiemstra

A “black gold rush” is transforming the Canadian province of Alberta into “the poster child for what a red-hot economy looks like.”¹ Fuelling this boom is a novel form of petroleum initially named the “tar sands” but more recently given the more environmentally friendly moniker the “oil sands.” Not only is this boom reshaping Alberta and Canada as a whole; it is also impacting the continent, since Alberta now supplies more oil to the United States than any other single supplier. In

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fact, this boom is a typical example of globalization with its astonishing negative and positive impacts on our economic, social, and environmental life.

In this paper I explore how scholarly and think-tank approaches to analysis tend not to address the overall questions of why this incredible oil sands boom is happening and what is at the heart of these developments. Instead, the mainstream academy tends to rely on narrow *interest*-oriented approaches or fragmented *disciplinary* approaches to understanding these phenomena. These approaches are characterized not only by a narrow focus but also by their silence on the central directional thrust of this “black gold rush.” When it comes to solutions to the problems caused by Alberta's oil sands boom, consequently, these studies typically prescribe *technical* solutions that serve to *adjust* the worst elements of the phenomenon. They do not consider whether fundamental redirection of these developments is necessary. I ask whether Christian scholars have developed any alternative *approaches* to analyzing over-arching cultural, social, and public-policy problems. I close by exploring some resources within the Reformational Christian tradition of scholarship that might develop a better approach to analysis: an approach that assists Christian communities to understand more deeply and address more normatively and effectively the complex challenges of globalization in our era.²

Alberta's black gold rush

When any state, province, or region experiences the highest levels of economic growth

in the country, attracts massive levels of global investment, and sets records for new job creation, our secular mainstream culture recommends that we respond with joy and celebration. And at least initially, most Albertans are taking this advice. The province is crazy about the black gold rush. Alberta has the highest consumer spending in Canada, the highest personal savings, and a soaring population growth. Albertans buy more hi-tech gadgets and consumer goods and services than in any other province. Wages are skyrocketing. We enjoy the lowest unemployment rate in Canada, sinking below 4 percent. Immigration of skilled workers from other provinces and countries cannot keep up with labour demand. The Alberta government runs billion-dollar budgetary surpluses each year and prides itself on being the only debt-free province in the country. Alberta is the centre of international attention as its oil-driven economic growth powers the entire national economy and now plays a significant role in the energy and economic futures of the U.S.A and the world. In addition to this economic “good news,” Alberta is endowed with awesome Rocky Mountain beauty in Banff and Jasper National Parks, and its people bask in liberty, peace, and stability while many around the world suffer deprivation, oppression, and war. It’s no surprise, therefore, that many think of Alberta as a promised land, as the land flowing with milk and honey (cf. Ex. 3:16-18).

What does Alberta have to thank for these economic “blessings”? Although its conventional oil and gas reserves are depleting, Alberta’s oil sands contain petroleum reserves second in size only to Saudi Arabia. At least 175 billion barrels can be recovered from the oil sands with existing technology, and with new technologies under investigation the recoverable reserves could swell to as much as 2.5 trillion barrels! Current production from the oil sands is just over 1 million barrels a day, projected to reach 3 million by 2015, and 6 million barrels by 2030. Most of this production is shipped directly to the United States, which, President George W. Bush recently admitted, “is addicted to oil.”²³ Guess what. Alberta is the new “supplier” on the block, and America’s addiction has become our prosperity!

Development of the oil sands took off when

oil prices soared. Production from the oil sands is generally profitable at around \$35 U.S. per barrel, according to Canada’s National Energy Board. Oil sands extraction plants that are already established and running, like Syncrude and Suncor, make a profit at prices as low as \$25 per barrel. Large trans-national energy corporations stand to make mammoth profits from the oil sands. Not surprisingly, investment in the oil sands has jumped to \$90 billion dollars in current extraction and plant construction, and another \$100 billion of investment is planned over the next decade.

Amazing oil sands operations

At this point you are probably wondering what exactly the oil sands are and why are they fuelling such explosive growth. The oil sands are essentially oil-soaked sand found at or near the surface of the earth. Technically, they are “deposits of bitumen, a heavy black viscous oil that must be rigorously treated to convert it into an upgraded crude oil before it can be used by refineries to produce gasoline and diesel fuels.”²⁴ The best way to describe bitumen is “a thick, sticky form of crude oil, so heavy and viscous that it will not flow unless heated or diluted with lighter hydrocarbons. At room temperature, it is much like cold molasses.”²⁵ These oil sand deposits cover nearly 149,000 square kilometres of Alberta, which is 23 percent of the province,⁶ or an area larger than the state of Florida.

The immense scale and technical complexity of the oil sands extraction, upgrading, and refining processes reinforce the popular sense of awe and wonder for these developments. David Suzuki, a Canadian award-winning scientist, environmentalist, and broadcaster, describes the two main types of extraction processes:

A film of water surrounded by oil coats each grain of sand. The bond has to be broken by an energy-intensive hot water process. There are essentially two methods of extraction. If it’s a deep deposit, steam to liquefy the oil must be piped underground. The oil seeps like molasses into wells where it can be pumped to the surface. For shallower deposits, they dig giant open pit mines, 100-metre deep holes, as big as 100 square kilometres. In one day,

one oil sands mine processes a staggering 450,000 tonnes of earth.⁷

Now you are probably starting to imagine the immensity of these operations, but let's take a closer look at some amazing oil sands facts.⁸ It takes two tonnes of sand to produce one barrel of oil. For the open pit mines, the so-called "overburden" is scrapped off; then the oil sands layer is removed and trucked to plants that separate the bitumen from the sand and water. Currently, "oil sands producers move enough overburden and oil sands every two days to fill Toronto's Skydome or New

Recently, however, a sense of disquiet is growing at the margins of Alberta society. New mega-projects are driving unprecedented economic growth, but the ecological destruction, social dislocation, and economic problems following in its wake are becoming more and more obvious.

York's Yankee Stadium."⁹ Imagine the largest dump trucks in the world, 22 feet tall and 48 feet from front to back, weighing 400 tonnes, and costing U.S. \$6 million each. These trucks carry loads of bitumen-soaked sand to extraction plants. The oil sands operations currently use two times the water used by Calgary, a city of one million people. The immense scale of these operations is highlighted by the fact that the toxic-tailings pond of one mine is held back by the third largest dam in the world! All of the oil sands projects officially proposed at this time would produce open pit mines 2000 square kilometres in size. The natural gas that will be used to extract the bitumen, when

the forecast oil sands developments are in place and production of 5 million barrels per day is achieved, is enough to heat every home in Canada. At the geographical location of the oil sands, the village of Ft. McMurray has grown from 1,500 people in the 1960s into a city of over 70,000 today.

The awesome scale of the oil sands operations and the incredible scientific and technical expertise required to extract this oil tends to reinforce the reigning economic assumption that oil sands developments are enormously and automatically beneficial. For the first years of the current boom, the stance of many Albertans could be summarized by the (perhaps mythical) bumper sticker slogan that appeared just after the collapse of the last 1980s oil boom: "*God give me another oil boom, and I promise not to blow it this time!*" This attitude reflects the belief that basically everything went all right during the last oil boom in Alberta, except that some failed to profit as much as they had hoped. Recently, however, a sense of disquiet is growing at the margins of Alberta society. New mega-projects are driving unprecedented economic growth, but the ecological destruction, social dislocation, and economic problems following in its wake are becoming more and more obvious.

Media analyses: "Potholes on an economic superhighway"

The popular media reports a number of problems that are emerging from the black gold rush, although these are generally out-weighted by praise for the economic *benefits* of the boom. In a recent pull-out section of the *Edmonton Journal* dedicated to oil sands,¹⁰ for example, Gary Lamphier uses the metaphor of "an economic superhighway" to describe the explosive money-making activity around these developments. He celebrates the fact that Alberta's \$187 billion economy is "poised to widen its economic and competitive lead against the rest of the nation" as it stands on the "brink of an era of unprecedented prosperity." He repeats the commonly recited proofs for economic benefits: the oil sands are producing opportunities for businesses to *invest*, to create high-paying *jobs*, to generate abundant wealth, and to painlessly multiply government revenues.

In the context of celebrating these positives,

Lamphier does touch on some problems. The way in which he frames them, however, reveals a lot about his perspective on the boom. Gleaned from interviews with “some of Canada’s best and brightest commentators,” Lamphier outlines five key challenges: shortages of skilled workers in almost every sector of the economy; a critical deficiency of infrastructure (roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, etc.); a general over-dependence on commodity prices and associated “lack of (economic) diversification”; the lack of a provincial government “spending plan” (it is too freewheeling in spending the royalty and revenue windfalls); and the fifth and presumably the scariest challenge, the threat of “outside economic risks,” such as the U.S., the major consumer of Alberta’s oil and gas products, slipping into an economic slump. These problems are then portrayed as “potholes,” that is, as mere fringe phenomena on an otherwise healthy, vibrant, and vigorous economic superhighway. Potholes may cause inconvenience and discomfort, but they are not understood to signal any fundamental problems with the superhighway itself. The metaphor of potholes in a superhighway implies that the highway itself is sound and heading in the correct direction. Significantly, Lamphier’s report represents the vast majority of mass-media coverage of the oil sands economy.

Scholarly analyses: Fragmented issues and technical fixes

The popular media’s way of approaching and understanding the oil sands boom reflects some of the key features also found in the approaches used in the scholarly and think-tank studies of the oil sands. Time and space do not permit a full exploration of these studies. At this point, I present some of the distinguishing oil sands problems identified in this literature. My aim is to draw out the characteristic approaches and underlying assumptions evident in these scholarly and think-tank studies. Significantly, these approaches to analyzing culture-wide problems have also made their way into Christian higher education and thereby, in my opinion, present considerable challenges to and obstacles for carrying out our Christian scholarly vocation.

Economic problems

Economic studies of the oil sands identify a growing list of problems. For purposes of illustration, I identify four. First, studies show that the boom is causing a serious shortage of skilled labour and trades’ people in Alberta.¹¹ Skyrocketing economic growth exposed major problems with labour mobility, the introduction of foreign workers into Canada, and official recognition of off-shore professional and trade credentials. The same studies propose solutions to these problems, such as developing training for aboriginal peoples, so that they can also participate in oil sands jobs, and creating a more systematic and stream-lined credentialing system for foreign workers.

Second, economic studies also show that Alberta’s consumer prices and costs of living are spiralling upwards.¹² Wage increases, mounting consumer demand for goods and services, housing shortages, and a rising consumer price index combine to make Alberta a more and more expensive place to live. Poor people are especially vulnerable to rising rental rates, the shortage of homeless shelters, increasing prices, and the dilemma of fixed social incomes. But all Albertans are affected by these trends. Wealthier Albertans face increased renovation costs as inflation and house prices have doubled in the last few years. All levels of government face rapidly rising construction costs for public infrastructure, schools, and hospitals, as well as spiralling costs for public services. Albertans may be *richer*, but they are also paying more for private and public goods and services. One commonly recommended solution for these problems is to slow down the rate of expansion of the oil sands development and thereby cool inflation, lower construction costs, and ease pressures on the economy.

Studies also identify a third problem: the low level of royalties collected from corporations that exploit the oil sands.¹³ In Canada, natural resources on crown land are owned, controlled, and administered by provincial governments on behalf of their citizens. Corporations may receive permission to extract these resources in exchange for paying royalties. A royalty is not a tax but a fee paid in exchange for the right to develop and sell

a publicly owned resource. Studies argue that the government has exercised poor stewardship of this non-renewable crown resource by failing to collect a fair share of royalties. They note that Alaska imposes a higher royalty rate on oil companies. In relation to the oil sands, Alberta charges a royalty rate of 1 percent of gross revenue until initial plant construction is paid for, then a 25-percent rate based on net revenue once a company starts to produce oil and make money in its operation.¹⁴ Some studies suggest that this royalty policy amounts to *giving oil away* in order to finance the initial construction and operation costs of plants owned and operated by profitable, trans-national oil corporations. Furthermore, the royalty rate stays at 25 percent of profits even if oil prices sky-rocket, producing windfall profits. A common solution proposed for this problem is that Alberta raise its royalty rates on non-renewable oil sands and invest in future generations.

Fourth, economic studies inspired by Canadian nationalism¹⁵ argue that trans-national oil companies are piping, and others plan to pipe, the unrefined bitumen products extracted from the Canadian oil sands directly into the U.S.A for upgrading, refining, and production of end-products. This means Canada forgoes the associated benefits of investment, jobs, and other economic spin-offs. Studies propose that Alberta adopt regulations requiring companies to upgrade and refine bitumen in Canada.

So, what's the point of reciting these economic problems and solutions? While we can learn a lot from these studies about the costs and benefits of speeding down an *economic superhighway*, we need to consider carefully the assumptions that seem to underlie these studies. Several stand out. First, these studies do not explore the overall thrust of the oil sands boom, ask why it is occurring, or investigate whether on balance it is a healthy or destructive overall occurrence. Instead, they narrowly focus on *problems* as fragmented phenomena that can be studied and understood in isolation. Second, proposed solutions tend to be formulated as technical policy adjustments that are aimed to fix individual problems or at least mitigate their worst side effects. The bottom-line assumption underlying these features seems to be that the oil

sands boom is a natural development, on balance sound and beneficial, and for all intents and purposes destined to continue unfolding. Therefore, economic studies do not bother exploring whether the oil sands developments should be redirected, turned around, or stopped outright. Nor do they ask how their solutions might contribute to such change. The same pattern of assumptions also emerges from social and environmental studies of the boom.

The bottom-line assumption underlying these features seems to be that the oil sands boom is a natural development, on balance sound and beneficial, and for all intents and purposes destined to continue unfolding.

Social problems

Social analyses of the oil sands boom show clearly that not everyone shares in the prosperity.¹⁶ Let me briefly introduce three problems identified in this literature, moving from problems experienced by those most immediately impacted—aboriginal peoples—to problems impacting people abroad—the poor in the global south.

First, studies show that some aboriginal nations living near the oil sands operations in Fort McMurray are unhappy with the way these developments disrupt and destroy their traditional way of life and their inheritance of land, air, water, wildlife and ecology.¹⁷ While many policy solutions seek to curb and diminish these negative side effects, the more common solution for this problem is to replace traditional lands and lifestyles with jobs and business opportunities for native peoples in the oil sands.

Other studies focus on the stubborn persistence of poverty across Alberta in spite of the boom. They show that the gap between rich and poor is actually growing. In 2004, when the oil sands boom was in full swing, the Edmonton Social Planning Council (ESPC) reported that 350,000 Albertans lived in poverty. More than 100,000 of these were children (14.1 percent).¹⁸ In 2007, ESPC Research and Policy Coordinator John Kolkman noted that little had changed: “Despite a booming economy with record low unemployment and labour shortages—Edmonton’s social health index is mixed with some indicators up, others down, and a modest increase of 10.95 per cent since 1993.” On the down side, he elaborates, “...there is growing inequality in incomes and wealth. There are more low-weight babies, increased incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, and higher rates of family violence. These negative trends show that we have a long way to go to improve social health in our community.”¹⁹ Key suggestions for dealing with these problems include increasing official minimum wages, raising income transfers, and improving social services. To deal with the growing problem of homelessness, studies propose adjusting the market so that it provides more homeless shelters and low-cost housing.

Third, impacts of the oil sands boom surprisingly reverberate in the global south as well. Alberta anticipates \$100 billion in oil sands investment over the next decade so that it can supply energy for what amounts to excessive and artificial *wants* of the global north. At the same time, the genuine and pressing *needs* of the poor in the global south fail to attract significant private or public investment. Problems of clean water, malnourishment, poverty, mal-development, environmental destruction, disease, and poor health simply do not attract the attention of private investors. The solution, studies tell us, is to increase investment to the global south either through increased foreign aid or by structurally adjusting southern government policies so that their economies attract more private investment.

Studies dealing with the social impacts of the oil sands boom have much to teach us. At the same time, we might ask ourselves whether these studies and the proposed solutions would actually redirect the overall oil sands venture so that it operates

in a wise, just, stewardly, and equitable way. Can technical policy adjustments really transform the current mode of exploiting the oil sands into an overall healthy venture?

Environmental problems

Studies of the environmental problems arising from the oil sands add to our already long list of problems.²⁰ The studies catalogue problems relating to resource waste, loss of habitat, pollution, health problems, climate change, the loss of future possibilities, and loss of clean air, water, and soil. I explore only three of these problems.

First, water-related problems are growing on all fronts of the oil sands operations. Both the open-pit mining and in-situ [steam injection] forms of recovery use huge amounts of fresh water. The level of the Athabasca River, the main source of fresh water in the region, is dropping; and water levels have not returned to their predevelopment levels. Local aquifers are also being drawn down at a rapid rate. Extraction processes produce water pollution and place huge demands on wastewater treatment. The steam-injection approach to extracting bitumen produces saline water as a by-product. The open-pit mining operations leave behind vast toxic tailing ponds. The Pembina report makes a number of very helpful suggestions, including a general call for reduced energy use. On the whole, however, environmental studies recommend overcoming water-related problems by discovering new technologies to conserve and recycle water.

Second, damage to land and ecology is a staggering problem. Current and planned open-pit mines would cover 2000 square kilometres. This is comparable to 28,465 National Football League fields, three times the size of the City of Edmonton, or five times the size of Denver. The area now leased to oil companies has grown to 32,000 square kilometres. The physical lay and quality of the land and environment is totally transformed by these developments. The oil sands deposits in northern Alberta are covered by the Boreal Forest, which wraps the entire northern region of the globe. Surface oil sand mines cause massive disruption and loss of habitat. Furthermore, 40 percent of the Boreal Forest is wetlands, and notably 35

percent of the world's wetlands are located in Canada's portion of the Boreal Forest! Even if an area is developed by the steam-injection process rather than strip-mining, the ecology of the area is still severely damaged by the fragmentation of forests caused by roads, seismic exploration lines, pipelines, power lines, and other infrastructure. To repair damage done to the land and ecology of the region, commentators propose developing new knowledge and technologies to prevent this damage and devising better practices for restoring and rehabilitating mining and in situ sites.

Air pollution is a third problem identified by the reports. Oil sands developments release a variety of toxic and other pollutants, making Alberta the number-one acid-rain polluter in Canada today. Alberta's 3 million people now pollute more than industrialized Ontario with 11 million people.

Participants and critics alike tend to define economic, social, and environmental problems narrowly, in terms of their interests; they then craft technical solutions to adjust the development processes and to reduce harmful side effects; and finally, they proceed to lobby government to adopt these policy solutions.

Large amounts of fossil fuels are burned to extract, upgrade, refine, and transport oil sand products. Greenhouse gas emissions from the oil sands far exceed those of any other form of energy! In this era of heightened awareness over global warming, the oil sands developments are pushing Canada well beyond its Kyoto Treaty obligations. Studies

propose that we invest in technologies and develop better regulatory regimes for reducing pollutants, minimizing acid rain, and diminishing and disposing of greenhouse gases.

As we observed with the social and economic studies, the environmental studies also tend to tackle the oil sands phenomenon in ways that do not adequately address the overall character, nor central heart direction, of the oil sands developments. Can they offer solutions that are more than technical adjustments to this boom and instead fundamentally redirect these developments in more stewardly, equitable, just, and wise directions?

A paradigm shift in models of analysis

Interestingly, these very questions arose in an intense debate catalyzed by the controversial essay by Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, "The Death of Environmentalism: Global warming politics in a post-environmental world,"²¹ first published October 2004. While the authors wanted to honour past achievements of the environmental movement, in this essay they focus on its failings, in particular the movement's ineffective approach to global warming. Recent U.S.A policy shows, the authors claim, that "modern environmentalism is no longer capable of dealing with the world's most serious ecological crisis."

The environmental movement is failing, Shellenberger and Nordhaus argue, because it relies on the view of scholarship and policy action that dominates our society. The Enlightenment belief in rationality and human mastery completely dominates our contemporary politics, culture, and academia. It tells us three things: first, problems should be defined according to our interests, that is, as "environmental" or social, or cultural, or economic interests. Second, we should craft "technical" remedies to these problems "based on sound science." Finally, we should "sell" our solution—through interest group lobbying and media campaigns—as the proper technical solution for legislators to adopt.

Significantly, this is the same underlying approach to scholarship and policy action identified in our assessment of the various oil sands studies. Participants and critics alike tend to define

economic, social, and environmental problems narrowly in terms of their interests; they then craft technical solutions to adjust the development processes and to reduce harmful side effects; and finally, they proceed to lobby government to adopt these policy solutions.

This approach fails, Shellenberger and Nordhaus argue, because problems such as climate change are not narrowly “environmental” problems at all. To speak of the environment in this way transforms it into a “thing,” for which “interests groups” can devise technical solutions and then politically lobby for their adoption. This approach is too reductionistic, fragmented, and compartmentalised. The environment is us too, the authors argue: climate change is integrally linked to our entire way of life and built into our societal institutions and core values. They observe that “not one of America’s environmental leaders is articulating [in their public campaigns on climate change] a vision of the future commensurate with the magnitude of the crisis. Instead, they promote technical policy fixes like pollution controls and higher vehicle mileage standards—proposals that provide neither the popular inspiration nor the political alliances the community needs to deal with the problem.” This observation is eerily on target for Alberta’s oil sands boom as well.

Shellenberger and Nordhaus propose that we “take a collective step back to rethink everything. We will never be able to turn things around as long as we understand our failures as essentially tactical, and make proposals that are essentially technical.” The environmental movement needs to “reframe their thinking about the problem and the solutions.” This reframing involves at least two steps, they conclude. First, “environmentalists need to tap into the creative worlds of myth-making, even religion, not to better sell narrow and technical policy proposals but rather to figure out who we are and who we need to be.” Second, the environmental movement needs to create “new institutions and proposals around a big vision and a core set of values.”

A challenge to Christian scholarship

Shellenberger and Nordhaus’s message ought to reverberate positively with Christian scholars and

activists. The Reformational Christian tradition, for example, has long emphasized the centrality of a religion within each *way of life* as well as the importance of creating new institutions and policy proposals to transform a culture. But here’s the rub. Even when we develop distinctively Christian institutions of higher education and Christian social, political, and economic organizations, we may still end up disregarding Shellenberger and Nordhaus’ rightful criticism of Enlightenment approaches to scholarship and policy! In *Capitalism and Progress*, for example, Bob Goudzwaard observes that Christian political parties and labour movements in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe failed to adequately critique and break with mainstream approaches to social, economic, and political developments. Thus, they “often hardly differed from liberal and socialist parties and labour organisations.” While Goudzwaard notes “certain differences of approach and intent existed,” he concludes that “it would be incorrect to claim that in dealing with *progress* Christian political and social organisations, with respect to their practical policy, have displayed a style of their own, or that, in distinction from other such organisations, they occupied themselves intensively with the question of *the direction of progress*. Synthesis with the entire development of society is the mark of modern Christendom.”²²

Time does not permit me to explore why Christian social organizations, colleges, and universities have so often failed in this way. I simply note that, indeed, Christians frequently do not ask penetrating questions about the direction of our culture or of enormous culture-shaping projects like the oil sands. This failure is certainly not due to the lack of resources within the Christian traditions, including the Reformational tradition. Sometimes, however, key resources and approaches are left on the periphery of these traditions. When Reformational scholars turn to Kuyper’s thought, for example, we tend to zero in on his idea of two sciences in *The Principles of Sacred Theology*,²³ where he argues that obedience and disobedience can produce two distinctive sciences. In Dooyeweerd’s thought, we gravitate to *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*²⁴ and similar texts dealing with the structure of theoretical thought and its intrinsic connection

to faith. We then set to work applying these insights abstractly to our various disciplines. While these basic ideas are critical for Christian scholarship, other strands in these and other Reformational writings provide insights for developing a penetrating approach to analyzing overarching contemporary cultural problems. I close this paper by surveying examples of Reformational thinkers that provide resources for discerning the religious direction and dominating structures of our society. Although I restrict my comments to the Reformational tradition, we have much to learn from many different Christian traditions.

Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876)

One of Groen van Prinsterer's most famous and lasting contributions is his analysis of the French Revolution and its impacts in *Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution*.²⁵ Central to his approach to this decisive cultural event is his claim that the Enlightenment spiritual commitments of the revolutionaries led them down a particular historical trajectory. Groen's approach involved analyzing how the *spirits of the time* influenced key economic, social, and political structures and events of this era. While this was primarily a historical analysis, Groen also tackled other key contemporary problems, such as the Dutch state's and Reformed Church's religious persecution of the minority *Afscheiding* Churches. Here he shows how the religious-ideological spirit of the French Revolution shaped the structures and influenced these actors and their program. Groen's analysis of the Dutch-school struggle also uncovered how Enlightenment convictions influenced key Dutch officials to impose unjust and homogenising school policies on Roman Catholic and orthodox Reformed minorities. For each cultural problem, Groen conducted analyses of the larger patterns, beliefs, and structures of the society in order to propose solutions that would, in his view, genuinely redirect and resolve the problems.

Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920)

Kuyper also tackled a variety of leading cultural problems of his day. In his study of the *social question*, or *The Problem of Poverty*,²⁶ Kuyper argues for, and begins to conduct, an architectonic critique of his society in order to clarify the

origins and dynamics of poverty in industrialising societies. This approach to analysis, he argues, must consider seriously the spiritual dynamics of liberal capitalism and socialism and unravel the ways in which these ideologies decisively shape the structural architecture and day-to-day practices of society. When dealing with solutions to this problem, Kuyper warns that personal conversion alone would never be sufficient to overcome the inertia of the oppressive structures causing poverty. At the same time, adjustments to the institutions and structures alone would also be insufficient, since people do not become good and selfless automatically when placed in improved structures. Conversion and structural change are both needed. Thus, Kuyper argues that an architectonic critique of society must involve discerning the deepest beliefs of society as well as analyzing its underlying

...Kuyper argues for, and begins to conduct, an architectonic critique of his society in order to clarify the origins and dynamics of poverty in industrialising societies.

structural patterns. This approach would provide the context for developing and proposing alternative policies inspired by the Spirit of Christ. Kuyper's architectonic critique is also evident in, or implied by, much of his other work, e.g. pluralism and school policy, labour unions, pension issues, colonial policy, university rights, church freedoms, and so on. Informed by this approach, Kuyper formed new Christian organizations as needed to serve as platforms for transforming the structures and beliefs of his society.

Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977)

Dooyeweerd's philosophical writings are helpful for rethinking in-depth issues within

Christian scholarship. When seeking to develop approaches to analyzing major cultural problems, however, perhaps we should not start with ideas such as the modal scale but rather consult other stands in his thinking. *Roots of Western Culture*,²⁷ for example, is a series of newspaper articles that Dooyeweerd wrote in order to engage in the society-wide debate that was raging over how the Dutch economy, society, and political order ought to be rebuilt after World War II. While this work is built around a sweeping historical overview of Western philosophy and involves reflection on topics such as theoretical thought, its overall thrust is valuable for developing new approaches to cultural analysis. Dooyeweerd's intent is to show that deep religious beliefs inform and shape the various alternative proposals for institutional re-building and policy practice that were being debated at that moment in Dutch culture. He wanted his analysis to help the various spiritual communities in the Netherlands discern the "Pagan, Secular and Christian" visions then contesting the rebuilding of national institutions, practices, and policies. Once again, themes of depth-level spirituality and underlying structural architecture feature prominently in this approach.²⁸

Contemporary scholars

Various contemporary Reformational scholars, including Nicolas Wolterstorff and Bob Goudzwaard, also emphasize the importance of developing new approaches to analyzing contemporary problems. Wolterstorff presses home the urgent need for Christian scholarship to be placed in the service of the hurting and oppressed of the world. In *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*,²⁹ for example, he uses the Reformed vision of a "world formative Christianity" to challenge Churches and Christian scholars to better understand, and so to serve, the pressing needs of the third-world poor and marginalized.

Goudzwaard's view of Christian scholarship and social action³⁰ places the discernment of the spiritual roots and structural configuration of society at the heart of his approach to contemporary issues. In *Capitalism and Progress*, Goudzwaard sets out some key elements of his approach, particularly the need to examine carefully the everyday process

around a problem and then to discern the mutually interdependent depth-levels of spiritual faith and institutional architecture.³¹ He uses this approach to analyse various social, economic, and political problems, including economic policy, poverty, nuclear arms, environmental issues, globalisation, pluralism, and so forth.

Contemporary Christian organizations

A variety of Christian organizations have also worked with this strand of Reformational insights over the past decades. Two public-policy organizations, by way of example, have developed and employed this approach in addressing contemporary politics. In Canada, John Olthuis and Gerald Vandezande, of the advocacy group Citizens for Public Justice, developed an approach in the 1970s and 1980s, described as "Peeling an Onion,"³² to analyze Canada's problematic energy policy. More in the mode of a public scholar, Jim Skillen and the Centre for Public Justice in Washington have used and developed Reformational insights into a variety of penetrating studies of American public life and institutions. Recently, he used this approach in his examination of the U.S. role in international politics and the war in Iraq, in *With or Against the World: America's Role Among the Nations*.³³

Some features of a renewed approach

Christians need to engage in the ongoing project of developing and refining approaches to analysis so that churches, scholarly communities, and Christian organizations have appropriate tools for tackling the pressing issues of our times. By sifting through the insights of the Reformation tradition, as well as those of other traditions, we can renew our approaches to overarching contemporary problems. In summary, elements in the Reformational tradition deserve further attention. For example, each of the above Reformational thinkers views creaturely life as integral and interdependent under the Creator God. The way(s) of life manifested in a society, therefore, cohere in ways that need to be taken seriously by any approach. This coherence means, first, that a renewed approach to analysis must include serious and careful empirical examination of the everyday facts, practices, and

policies surrounding the problem because they are interwoven in very fabric of the larger way of life. Second, our approach also needs to involve careful consideration of the structures, institutions, and relationships of the society because they facilitate and further this way of life. We should ask, “What structural patterns give momentum to the everyday practices and policies that surround the problem being investigated?” Third, a renewed approach needs to involve discernment of the religious visions that integrate the way(s) of life and animate the structures of society, since they reflect the coherence and meaning that participants see in the world. Whether faithful or idolatrous, these religious visions need to be examined carefully and understood properly in order for us to grasp the coherence, dynamic, and direction of the overall culture. Fourth, a renewed approach to analysis must avoid too quickly segmenting life according to interests, or into segregated disciplines, because this segregation cuts off the object of analysis from the integrating religious vision, underlying structures, and overall way of life that animate the problem. So a renewed approach to analysis should at least include three levels:

Level I: Everyday integral reality of **practices, problems, and policies.**

Level II: Underlying **structural** architecture of society.

Level III: Depth-level **faith** assumptions.

By developing a more integral mode of analysis, we will be able to avoid simply formulating technical adjustments to a presumably good and fated political-economic reality; we will then be in stronger position to devise and propose healing steps that transform and normatively redirect a broken society.

Conclusion

To be salt and light to a fallen world (Matt. 5:13-16), Christians must be prepared to analyze and actively tackle the major cultural problems of our times. In this sense, Alberta’s oil sands boom is a fundamental call to Christian scholarship! In order to tackle it faithfully, however, we need to recognize that the approaches to analysis offered by contemporary scholarship and think tanks are spiritually loaded and themselves in need of critical

analysis, reworking, and spiritual reorientation. Working out biblically inspired approaches to analysis that enable us to serve our neighbours and creation wisely is one of the most important challenges facing Christian higher education today.

Endnotes

1. Gary Lamphier, “Paving the road ahead,” *Edmonton Journal*, March 11, 2006, F1.
2. I began this process of re-considering the oil sands developments and Christian approaches to analysis in the keynote address “Pop goes the Progress Myth: Awakening Biblical Hope in a Hypnotised Province,” delivered at the Social Justice Institute (Edmonton, 2005). A version is posted at <http://www.cpj.ca/topics/ab100sk/popping.pdf> and published in *Ecumenism* 40, no.160 (Dec. 2005): 4-13. Also see “Myth of progress hypnotises Albertans: Let’s rethink the oil sands with a faith-based approach,” *Edmonton Journal*, Jan. 16, 2006, A19.
3. President George Bush, “State of the Union Address,” Washington, D.C., January 31, 2006. Bush further asserts that “The best way to break this addiction is through technology.”
4. Alberta Government, “What is Oil Sands?” Retrieved July 18, 2007, from <http://www.energy.gov.ab.ca/100.asp>.
5. Alberta Government, “What is Oil Sands?”
6. Dan Woynillowicz, Chris Severson-Baker, & Marlo Reynolds, *Oil Sands Fever: The Environmental Implications of Canada’s Oil Sands Rush*, The Pembina Institute: Retrieved November, 2005, from <http://www.pembina.org/pub/203>, p.1.
7. David Suzuki, “When less is more,” *The Nature of Things*, CBC television, air date: Sunday, August 13, 2006, transcript: p. 3. Dr. Suzuki has a PhD in genetics, is co-founder of the David Suzuki Foundation, and an award-winning scientist, environmentalist, and broadcaster.
8. The next two paragraphs draw their statistics in part from Suzuki, “When less is more,” pp. 3-15.
9. Alberta Government, “What is Oil Sands?” Retrieved July 18, 2007, from <http://www.energy.gov.ab.ca/100.asp>.
10. Lamphier, “Paving the road ahead.”
11. Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry commissioned a report examining worker needs and shortages in the Regional Municipality of Wood

- Buffalo where most of the oil sands extraction occurs. Applications Management Consulting, *Wood Buffalo Labour Market Information: Worker Needs and Shortages Analysis*, (Final Report), prepared for: Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry, December 2007. Retrieved Feb. 11, 2008, from <http://www.woodbuffalo.net/>. Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry also issues periodic reviews of labour market, see: *Annual Alberta Labour Market Review, 2006*, retrieved Feb. 11, 2008, from <http://employment.alberta.ca/cps/rde/xchg/hre/hs.xml/67.html>, and the *Annual Alberta Regional Labour Market Review, 2006*, retrieved Feb. 11, 2008, from <http://employment.alberta.ca/cps/rde/xchg/hre/hs.xml/67.html>. For a critical perspective, see Alberta Federation of Labour, "Another Perspective on the Labour Shortage," *Labour Economic Monitor*, Fall 2007, retrieved Feb. 11, 2008, from <http://www.afl.org/publications-research/econ-monitor/default.cfm>.
12. See Statistics Canada, "Consumer Price Index, February 2007," *The Daily*, Tuesday, March 20, 2007, retrieved Feb. 11, 2008, from <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/070320/td070320.htm>. Longer term trends are explored in Statistics Canada, "Consumer Price Index, annually, by city, 2003-2007," table: 326-0021, last modified: 2008-01-29. Retrieved Feb. 11, 2008, from <http://www40.statcan.ca/l01/cst01/econ45a.htm>.
 13. See Amy Taylor, *Royalty Reform Solutions: Options for Delivering a Fair Share of Oil Sands Revenues to Albertans and Resource Developers*, Oil Sands Issue Paper, No. 5, (Pembina Foundation: May 2007). See this report, and a series of other studies on Alberta Royalty reform, at <http://www.pembina.org/pubs?filterCategories=11>; retrieved Feb. 11, 08. The government commissioned study of royalty rates issued the report: Bill Hunter, Chair, Royalty Review Panel, *Alberta Royalty Review Panel Final Report*, 2007, retrieved Feb. 11, 2008, from <http://www.albertaroyaltyreview.ca/>. The Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach responded with a new royalty rate, in Alberta's New Royalty Framework on October 25th, 2007, retrieved Feb. 11, 2008, from http://www.energy.gov.ab.ca/About_Us/1293.asp.
 14. Alberta Energy, "Royalty Information Briefing #3 – Royalties – History and Description," Alberta Royalty Review 2007, retrieved July 4, 2007, from <http://www.energy.gov.ab.ca/Org/pdfs/InfoSeries-Report3-Formulas.pdf>.
 15. See, for example, Hugh McCullum, *Fuelling Fortress America: A Report on the Athabasca Tar Sands and U.S. Demands for Canada's Energy*, (The Parkland Institute and Polaris Institutes) March, 2006, retrieved Oct. 22, 2007, from <http://www.ualberta.ca/PARKLAND/research/studies/Fuelling%20Fortress%20America%20WEB.pdf>, and Gordon Laxer, *Freezing in the Dark: Why Canada Needs Strategic Petroleum Reserves*, Edmonton: Parkland Institute, January 31, 2008; retrieved Feb. 11, 08, from <http://www.ualberta.ca/PARKLAND/research/studies/index.html>.
 16. See, for example, Anette Wickenheiser, author, John Kolkman, editor, *Tracking the Trends, 2007 Edition*, Edmonton: Edmonton Social Planning Council, 2007. Also see statistics based on the Market Basket Measure, MBM, from Edmonton Social Planning Council, National Election News Release, May 23, 2004.
 17. Involvement of aboriginal groups with the oil sands varies greatly. Many first nations are being left out in the race to develop the tar sands, see <http://www.tarsandswatch.org/tags/aboriginal-rights>. A high profile dispute concerns the effects of pollution on aboriginal nations living near the oil sands. See, for example, Dr. Kevin Timoney, "A Study of Water and Sediment Quality as Related to Public Health Issues, Fort Chipewyan Alberta," (Nov. 7, 2007), retrieved Feb. 11, 08, from <http://www.tarsandstimeout.ca/images/resources/fcreportupdate-part1.pdf>. Commissioned by the Nunee Health Authority of Fort Chipewyan, this study looks into the health effects on aboriginal communities downstream of the oil sands mines and upgraders. Graham Lanktree, "Oilsands whistleblower MD cleared: Government charge of 'undue alarm' from cancer warning remains." *National Review of Medicine*, Vol. 5, No.1, Jan. 15, 2008.
 18. See statistics based on the Market Basket Measure, MBM, from Edmonton Social Planning Council, National Election News Release, May 23, 2004.
 19. Anette Wickenheiser, *Tracking the Trends*, ed. John Kolkman (Edmonton: Edmonton Social Planning Council, 2007).
 20. See Dan Woynilowicz, Chris Severson-Baker, Marlo Reynolds *Oil Sands Fever: The Environmental Implications of Canada's Oil Sands Rush*, Pembina Institute, 2005, pp. 19-58; David Suzuki, "When less is more," *The Nature of Things*, CBC television, air date: Sunday, August 13, 2006, and Ann Bordetsky, et. al., *Driving it Home: Choosing the right path for fuelling North America's transportation future*, jointly produced by Natural Resources Defense Council, Western Resource Advocates, and Pembina Institute, 2007. The information in the following environmental paragraphs are drawn from these reports.
 21. Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, "The Death of Environmentalism: Global warming politics in a post-environmental world," released at the Oct. 2004 meeting of the Environmental Grantmakers Association. Retrieved July 4, 2007, from http://thebreakthrough.org/images/Death_of_Environmentalism.pdf.
 22. Bob Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 117.

23. Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopaedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954; first edition, 1898).
24. Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, Three Volumes. Trans. David Hugh Freeman and William Young (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij H.J. Paris / Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1953).
25. Harry Van Dyke, *Groen van Prinsterer: Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution* (Jordan Station, Canada: Wedge, 1989).
26. Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, ed. James W. Skillen (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker, 1991).
27. Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular and Christian Options* (Toronto: Wedge, 1979).
28. Several of Dooyeweerd's students developed this strand of applied cultural analysis more fully in their writings, e.g. S. U. Zuidema, K.J. Popma, & J.P.A. Mekkes. Only a few of these works have been translated into English.
29. Nicolas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Eerdmans, 1983) and Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Reason within the bounds of religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976). Also see Nicolas Wolterstorff, *Education for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education*, eds. Clarence W. Joldersma and Gloria G. Stronks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).
30. Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress*. Also see Bob Goudzwaard, Mark Vander Vennen, David Van Heemst, *Hope in Troubled Times: A New Vision for Confronting Global Crises*, forward by Desmond Tutu (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); Bob Goudzwaard, *Idols of our Time* (IVP); and Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange, *Beyond Poverty and Affluence: Towards a Canadian Economy of Care* (Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1994).
31. Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress*, xix-xxv. He credits the late Bernard Zylstra with this approach (*Globalization and the Kingdom of God* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001], 15 and see 115n.6). Zylstra was one of the few doctoral students supervised by Dooyeweerd himself, and he taught political theory at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto between 1968-1986.
32. John A. Olthuis, "Peeling an Onion: Reflections on CJL's Energy Project," *Catalyst* (Spring, 1978): 22-30. A variety of research papers, articles and books have been produced by Citizens for Public Justice that are inspired, to one degree or another, by Reformational insights. See their website www.cpj.ca.
33. James W. Skillen, *With or Against the World: America's Role Among the Nations* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2005). Also see *The Scattered Voice: Christians at odds in the public square* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Zondervan, 1990); In *Pursuit of Justice: Christian-Democratic Explorations* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); and *Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civic Community* (Grand Rapids Mi.: Baker, 1994). The Center for Public Justice also has a wide range of papers, articles and commentary available at www.cpjjustice.org.