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Welfare reform and government re-invention are preoccupations of politicians and citizen advocates in the modern age. This paper explores the views of the late Abraham Kuyper regarding political institutions and how those institutions serve its citizens, especially the poor. Although Kuyper wrote a full century ago, his convictions, analyses, and solutions regarding the problem of poverty and the constitution of political authority are relevant today.

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Kuyper's Life as the Context for his Thought

Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) was a Dutch theologian, politician, philosopher, churchman and journalist. Born in Maassluis, The Netherlands, Kuyper was reared in a Reformed (Calvinist) environment. He graduated from the University of Leiden, earning a bachelor's degree in 1858 and a doctorate in theology in 1863. He was ordained in 1863 and assumed pastorates in Beesd (1863), Utrecht (1867), and finally Amsterdam (1870). His pastorate in Amsterdam of a conservative but populist congregation led him to reconsider his liberal theological views (Henderson 28-34).

Kuyper in his writings and political activity questioned the secularism of the state, the rampant individualism that followed the French Revolution, and the rationalism of theological liberalism. He was a leader of a new movement called "neo-Calvinism," an approach that combined the classical perspective of Reformed theology with political activism and vibrant inward piety. Kuyper's views on the relationship of church and state were influenced negatively by the Enlightenment and by Romanticism, and positively by the Protestant *Reveil* (religious revival) in The Netherlands and by the social gospel movement, including Christian socialism, that was prominent in England and in the United States.

The combination of orthodox Calvinism and evangelical pietism gave creative rebirth to Reformed thought and practice. Kuyper admired leaders of revivalism in The Netherlands, including Willem Bilderdijk (1756-1831). Bilderdijk, a poet

and theologian, was nationalistic and wanted to return to the era of the Dutch Republic, a constitutional government opposed to popular sovereignty. Bilderdijk also believed that the government should provide social welfare and ensure that no one lacked the basic necessities of life. It should guarantee that those who wanted to work could do so. These principles greatly influenced Kuyper's thought and the platform of the "Anti-Revolutionary Party" (Van der Kroef 319), the political party he led for forty-five years. The Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP) was reformist but desired a gradual, evolutionary reform rather than the violent revolution supported by Marxists. Kuyper found himself between conservative statesmen on the one hand and labor radicals on the other. As a devout, socially concerned Christian, he sought to carve out a middle way between these extremes.

In 1872 the young pastor became the editor of a new daily paper, *De Standaard*, which advocated an anti-revolutionary attitude first articulated by Groen van Prinsterer. In 1873 Kuyper entered the Dutch parliament, only to withdraw because of an excessive workload. Meanwhile, he helped to establish three organizations as political and religious power bases: the ARP (1877), the Christian Day School Association (1878), and the Free University of Amsterdam (1880).

The ARP, the political arm of the neo-Calvinist movement, challenged political radicalism and the liberalism and secularism stemming from the French Revolution. By 1887 Kuyper led the party, and it worked against labor radicalism by organizing Protestant and Catholic constituencies into coalition governments. In the 1970's, the ARP merged with the Catholic People's Party and the Christian-Historical Party.

In addition to *De Standaard*, the political daily of the ARP, Kuyper was also the editor of a church-related newspaper, *De Heraut (The Herald)*. His writing and editing skills enabled him to educate and inspire church members and citizens of the state for almost 45 years. After founding the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880, Kuyper served there as a professor and administrator. In the 1880's, Europe, like the rest of the world, was in the throes of an industrial revolution. Labor groups were organizing around issues of employment, wages, better working conditions, and compensation for injuries. Kuyper believed that the state and the church should address these issues. However, his democratic views created enemies among conservatives, even as labor radicals were impatient with his political gradualism. He would not tolerate labor strikes as a legitimate tactic, for example.[1] In 1886 he withdrew from the National Reformed Church and helped to form the Gereformeerde Kerken (Reformed Church) in 1892, uniting moderates and free church proponents. Kuyper was trying to free the church from state control, hence the term "free church."

In 1891 he worked to organize a Christian Social Congress to address what was then called the "social problem." On November 9, Kuyper gave an opening address to the First Christian Social Congress entitled, "Het Sociale Vraagstuk en de Christelijke Religie (The Social Problem and the Christian Religion)." This address was translated and reissued by James Skillen of the Center for Public Justice in 1991 as *The Problem of Poverty*. Another important work came at the end of the decade: in 1898 Kuyper gave the Stone Lectures at Princeton University in the United States, published later as *Lectures on Calvinism*. Although there were many other publications from the pen of Kuyper, these two works are the most enduring and most relevant for our discussion today.

Kuyper ran for the office of Prime Minister in 1901, similar to the Presidency in the United States. He won by uniting Catholics and Protestants around the Anti-Revolutionary Party, but alienated conservatives on the one hand and labor and radical socialists on the other. Conservatives did not think the state—or the church—should try to resolve labor and unemployment issues. Radicals argued that the only solution was to overthrow the state. Because of this intense political disunity and other unfortunate challenges such as a national railroad strike, Kuyper was Prime Minister for only one term. After his ouster in 1905, Kuyper emerged as a statesman and wrote much on the plight of the West, a plight which he believed could not be remedied unless the nation embraced political and social renewal based on evangelical Calvinist foundations.

Kuyper's legacy is noteworthy. He propelled Christians into cultural, societal, and political spheres of life. He fought against theological liberalism on the one hand and revolutionary secularism on the other. As James D. Bratt summarizes:

> Instead of withdrawing from or dictating to public life, Christians were to enter a pluralistic landscape, their convictions anchored in a comprehensive worldview and coordinated by distinctive Christian organizations in every social sector. Kuyper's labors remain, in sum, an impressive example of Reformed Christianity in its social, political, and cultural witness, philosophically coherent, structurally concerned, and institutionally deployed. (212-213)

Kuyper's Political Theology

Kuyper believed that Calvinism was more than a theology; it was a "life-system" or *Weltanschauung* (worldview) that embraced all of life. He argued that as a life-system, Calvinism offered specific insight about the three primary relationships of human life: how humans relate to God, to fellow human beings, and to the world (*Lectures on Calvinism*).[2] "Kuyperianism" is a worldview that proclaims, "there is not a square inch in the whole domain of human life of which Christ, the Sovereign of all, does not call out 'Mine!'"

A Reformed world and life view

For Kuyper, the implications of the Christian doctrine of creation are manifold. While he did not address ecological or environmental issues as we might today, he noted in *The Problem of Poverty*[3] that we are called to be stewards of the earth, protectors of the natural order and of each species God has created (66-67). Because nature was God's handiwork, Kuyper argued that Calvinists could engage in scientific discovery as a way to "replenish the earth, subdue it, and have dominion over everything that lives upon it." An extreme interpretation of this dominion has resulted in environmental pollution and exploitation, but that was not Kuyper's intent. What he meant was that scientific inquiry, agriculture, and industrial work are legitimate enterprises. Scientific inquiry helps us to further understand, honor, replenish, and protect the earth and the seas as God's created order (*LC* 130).

The implications of the doctrine of creation for human welfare are likewise profound. According to Scripture, all human beings are created in the image of God. This truth implies that the state must protect the equality of human beings, regardless of race, class, gender, or creed. It followed for Kuyper that the best political arrangement must be democratic and participatory, not hierarchical. In *Lectures on Calvinism* Kuyper fleshed out these principles:

> If Calvinism places our entire human life immediately before God, then it follows 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, and consequently equal as man to man. Hence we cannot recognize any distinction among men,[4] save such as has been imposed by God Himself, in that He gave one authority over the other, or enriched one with more talents than the other, in order that the man of more talents should serve the man with less, and in him serve his God. *Hence Calvinism condemns not merely all open slavery and systems of caste, but also all covert slavery of woman and of the poor; it is opposed to all hierarchy among men*; it tolerates no aristocracy save such as is able, either in person or in family, by the grace of God, to exhibit superiority of character or of talent, and to show that it does not claim this superiority for self-aggrandizement or ambitious pride, but for the sake of spending it in the service of God. So Calvinism was bound to find its utterance in the democratic interpretation of life; to proclaim the liberty of nations; and not to rest until both politically and socially every man, simply because he is man, should be recognized, respected and dealt with as a creature created after the Divine likeness. (27, italics added)

Kuyper argued that Calvinism politically and socially could create a more peaceful and just society through its all-embracing biblical vision.

For Kuyper, political and social interaction with the diversity of the human population was based on a corollary of the doctrine of creation, common grace. In a strict sense, common grace redemptively restrains human actions: "God, maintaining the life of the world, relaxes the curse which rests upon it, arrests its process of corruption, and thus allows the untrammeled development of our life in which to glorify Himself as Creator" (*LC* 30). Common grace had a positive role in that it signified that God had given gifts, talents, and creative capacities to all human beings, regardless of their religious state. It is this common grace that, in addition to restraining human evil, allows even "unregenerate" persons to contribute in the areas of philosophical thought, science, art, and social justice (125). For Kuyper, "the liberal arts are gifts which God imparts . . . to believers and to unbelievers" (160). The arts of rhetoric, political discourse, painting, and sculpture are all gifts from the Creator "as testimony of the divine bounty" even to those who do not believe.

In his work, *De Gemeene Gratie (Common Grace)* (Leyden, 1901, 3 vols.), Kuyper argued that grace is extended to all human beings, not just to the elect. This grace urges all people to practice "good works" which on the surface are indistinguishable from the "good works" that believers do. Van der Kroef writes:

> Consequently, Christians should have no qualms about participating in public affairs with non-Christians, since common grace gives both groups common ideals for which they can strive. It is wrong for a Christian, according to Kuyper, to withdraw from the world altogether, or to refuse to co-operate for the general welfare with those that think differently from him. (325)

All blessings come from God, and hence both specific gifts and the general welfare are contingent upon God's common grace.[5] The Christian does not possess special privileges because of his faith. This implies, for example, that a "heathen" might be better able to govern. Kuyper shied away from the notion of a "Christian" state, preferring rather to foster coalitions with people who shared similar values and commitments. "Christian and heathen, like all men, await God's grace. In the interim, common grace suffices" (325).

Kuyper did not draw undue distinctions between Christians and non-Christians; neither did he espouse views that were racist or ethnocentric. To the contrary, he wrote that the advanced democracies of The Netherlands and the United States (writing in 1890's) benefitted from racial and ethnic pluralism. Intercultural relations had created a "better" people, an enriched democratic society and culture. Kuyper argued that "the history of our race does not aim at the improvement of any single tribe, but at the development of *mankind* taken as a whole, and therefore needs this commingling of blood in order to attain its end" (*LC* 36). With the contemporary African American band, The Neville Brothers,[6] Kuyper would agree that we are all members of the human race, so there is no place for racism.

Hence, for Kuyper, Calvinism as a religious worldview challenged theories of racial superiority, precisely because it holds that all human beings derive from a common Creator and that all arts and cultures contribute to a better and higher civilization. Because of common grace, it was possible for people of any persuasion to govern and contribute to the common good. All peoples are valued in this view, regardless of race, class, or gender. Kuyper argued that Calvinism politically and socially could create a more peaceful and just society through its all-embracing biblical vision. Oppression and injustice were therefore blasphemous rejections of the gifts of God.

Kuyper's political theory and practice

Kuyper based his political theory on the unlimited sovereignty of God in the world. He rejected both monarchy and popular sovereignty. He opposed dictatorship as being oppressive, and he rejected the potential anarchy and individualism of radical democratic experiments (such as that of the Paris Commune). Because God alone was sovereign, Kuyper supported a pluralist notion of government under which social groups, including commonwealths and institutions, are directly subject to God. Kuyper argued that three separate and equal spheres coexisted: the state, the social sphere, and the church.

Although Kuyper saw no grounds for either a monarchy or a total state, he recognized that because of sin, God had ordained state and civil

magistrates to rule in his stead. He referred back to I Samuel in which God, despite his original intent of theocracy, granted Israel a monarch (Saul) because of Israel's sin and because she desired to be like other nations. Kuyper argued that "without sin there would have been neither magistrate nor state-order; but political life, in its entirety, would have evolved itself, after a patriarchal fashion, from the life of the family" (*LC* 80). To him, the mere existence of a police force, a Navy, or a military suggested that evil was present and must be controlled. Further, "every State-formation, every assertion of power from the magistrate, every mechanical means of compelling order and of guaranteeing a safe course of life is therefore always something unnatural" (80). However, without the direct rule of God in our lives and in our institutions, mediating rulers are necessary.

In Kuyper's view, God created the powers, including the states and the magistrates, to do his will: they are servants and instruments of God's sovereign power. The magistrates are instruments of "'common grace,' to thwart all license and outrage and to shield the good against the evil" (*LC* 82). All powers, whether in empires or republics, in cities or in states, rule *by the grace of God* (83). Kuyper preferred a loose federation—a cooperation among equal but competing entities, equal but distinct spheres of power, none of which is absolute. With the return to state power and the rhetorical demise of central government in the modern world, Kuyper's ideas are worth considering. Kuyper agreed with John Calvin that a republic is the best form of government. He regarded a democracy, though inefficient, still to be the best form of political expression considering the options. "God's own direct government is absolutely monarchical; no monotheist will deny it. But Calvin considered a co-operation of many persons under mutual control, i.e., *a republic*, desirable, now that a mechanical institution of government is necessitated by reason of sin" (83).

Kuyper wrote, "The State may never become an octopus, which stifles the whole of life. It must occupy its own place, on its own root, among the other trees of the forest; and thus it has to honor and maintain every form of life which grows independently in its own sacred autonomy" (*LC* 96-97). Kuyper thus defined a regulatory role for the central government. It was to compel respect for the autonomy of each separate sphere and association. It was to support the activity of local organizations, while not allowing threats to the social fabric, including insurrectionist groups like today's militia movement or other forms of extremism. It also was responsible to insist that each institution and each separate social sphere defend the indigent, the weak and vulnerable members of society. Finally, the central government had a responsibility to curb the abuse of power and to coerce each sphere to "bear the *personal* and *financial* burdens for the mainte

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nance of the natural unity of the state" (*LC* 97). Note, on the latter point, Kuyper believed that public welfare was the responsibility not of one sphere (be it government, charity, or religion) but of all areas of society. As Peter Heslam correctly elaborates, the government exists as an umpire, but not an empire: "Although the state was merely one of the social spheres, it did enjoy supremacy, and the relation between this supremacy and the sovereignty of the social sphere was to be regulated by means of both constitutional law and representative government" (158).

The second sphere Kuyper defended is the social sphere, society, which included the arts, agriculture, business, labor, science, and above all, the family. This sphere, he argued, existed separately from the state yet was connected to it. In describing the spheres, Kuyper drew from Calvin, who wished for a cooperative relationship between the state and smaller bodies such as guilds and cities. "Knighthood, the rights of the city, the rights of guilds and much more, led then to the self-assertion of *social* 'States,' with their own civil authority; and so Calvin wished the law to be made by the cooperation of these with the

High magistrates" (*LC* 97), and while the state protects it, the state should not violate it or meddle in its affairs. It seems that Kuyper read Calvin rather literally at this point, for the doctrine of the spheres seemed to reflect the decentralized state of Switzerland, including a provision for "free cities."

In Kuyper's proposed decentralized social arrangement, institutions such as the university, the guild, and trade-unions exercise "the power of exclusive independent judgment and authoritative action, within [their] proper sphere of operation" (*LC* 96). Kuyper's founding of the Free University of Amsterdam was based on his goal of developing an institution of higher learning free from the dictates of the state or (state) church. This decentralization applies to geographical entities as well, including municipal governments. "The social life of cities and villages forms a [separate] sphere of existence, which arises from the very necessities of life, and which therefore must be autonomous" (96). Kuyper also defended the autonomy of free associations against the encroachment of the state or the state church. "A free church, a free school, and a free state, within a free society–this principle of public policy captures Kuyper's vision of a just social order" (Spykman 104). While Kuyper is unclear about what constitutes the social glue—what holds the separate spheres together—there is nonetheless the opportunity to celebrate and support the freedom and responsibilities of individual associations and community-based organizations as vital institutions in society.

Regarding the third sphere, the church, Kuyper held strictly to the separation of church and state. He wrote, "The sovereignty of the State and the sovereignty of the Church exist side by side" (*LC* 107). He resisted strongly state control over the church, a state-church system, for he regarded a national church to be a heathen conception. "The Church of Christ is not national but ecumenical. Not one single state, but the whole world is its domain" (*LC* 65). He argued that the church should operate as a free-standing institution based not on state support but on the voluntary principle. He also rejected a church that resembled the intolerant Spanish Inquisition. He defended the liberty of conscience, but also the authority of a church to expel any person detrimental to the institution.

> The government has to respect the claims on protection of every citizen. The Church may not be forced to tolerate as a member one whom she feels obliged to expel from her circle; but on the other hand no citizen of the State must be compelled to remain in a church which his conscience forces him to leave. (LC 108)

The key word in this formula for Kuyper is *freedom*. For Kuyper, liberty "in the French Revolution [meant] a civil liberty for every Christian to *agree with the unbelieving majority*; in Calvinism, a liberty of conscience . . . enables every man to serve God *according to his own conviction and the dictates of his own heart*" (*LC* 109). Kuyper did, however, reject unrestrained freedom.

Despite its freedom from other spheres, the church for Kuyper was anything but a sectarian institution removed or untouched by the larger society. He argued that religion is connected to all of life, and "no sphere of human life is conceivable in which religion does not maintain its demands that God shall be praised, that God's ordinances shall be observed, and that every *labora* shall be permeated with its *ora* in fervent and ceaseless prayer. . . . To be sure," he wrote further, "there is a concentration of religious light and life in the Church, but then in the walls of this church there are wide open windows, and through these spacious windows the light of the Eternal has to radiate over the whole world" (*LC* 53). In other words, the church exists with windows open to and from the world, not in isolation. The church should be a beacon in the world, a prophetic light that exposes every darkness. Kuyper used an urban biblical metaphor to describe the church's relationship with the world.

> Here is a city, set upon a hill, which every man can see afar off. Here is a holy salt that penetrates in every direction, checking all corruption. And even he who does not yet imbibe the higher light, or maybe shuts his eyes to it, is nevertheless admonished, with equal emphasis, and in all things, to give glory to the name of the Lord. (53)

For Kuyper, the governmental system of the church should emphasize its congregational autonomy. He defended a "thoroughly Presbyterian form of government," yet his views seem to be

even more radically democratic. All believers and all congregations are of equal standing. No church could exercise dominion over any other, for all local churches were of equal rank. He argued that these congregations should be united synodically as a confederation, a structure that favored congregational autonomy, but he rejected any form of governmental structure that posed a hierarchical authority, except under God and the rule of Christ.

With respect to a theology of social welfare, Kuyper believed that it was the responsibility of every societal institution—including the state, business, the church, and community-based organizations—to care for the common good. While the government exists to protect autonomy, it also exists to encourage that all spheres of society take responsibility for the common welfare. With movements toward state rights in our age, Kuyper's insistence on the responsibility of all spheres and levels of government to seek the common good is compelling. Kuyper's respect for pluralism and his encouragement of local institutions and community-based organizations provide a new model for reinventing government. Kuyper might be describing a political arrangement whose time has come again.[7]

Kuyper and the "Social Problem"

Kuyper lived in an age when social questions were burning, even for the Church. In England, "Christian socialists" such as Charles Kingsley (1819-1875) and Frederick Denison Maurice (1805-1872) wrestled with such issues. In London, William Booth (1829-1912) analyzed wealth and vice in England in his book *In Darkest England and the Way Out*. He believed that the problems facing the poor were structural in nature: poverty could not be addressed until the structures of society were changed and wealth was distributed justly. However, the Salvation Army, founded in 1865 by Booth, sought to give individual poor people "soup, soap and salvation," an individualist perspective on poverty. Booth was unable to resolve the tension between what he believed was needed–(universal) structural change–and what was accomplished—(individual) personal salvation and renewal.

In the United States, the social gospel movement led by Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) and Washington Gladden (1836-1918) addressed many of the same issues. Rauschenbusch and other social gospelers assessed the situation in this way: while institutions such as the church, the school, and the political process (democratization) were trying to "Christianize" the social order, they wrongly allowed wealth to accumulate without restraint. Poverty resulted from the failure of social institutions and their policies, not from unwise or immoral choices of the poor. Like the biblical prophets, the social gospelers decried a lack of adequate protections for the most vulnerable of society.

Kuyper believed that it was the responsibility of every sphere to work for a just society.

Kuyper's analysis of the nature of poverty was quite similar to that of the social gospelers and must be understood in that context. He believed that the problem in The Netherlands, as elsewhere, was plutocracy, the rule of money. He defined sin as "greed and the lust for power [that] disturbed or checked the healthy growth of human society, sometimes cultivating a very cancerous development for centuries" (*PP* 31). Kuyper recognized that greed and power "joined forces [to] enthrone false principles that violate . . . human nature [and] out of these false principles systems were built that varnished over injustice" (31). Kuyper's analysis of the problem of poverty was systemic, not moralistic.

Kuyper noted that "the ineradicable inequality between men produced a world in which the stronger devours the weaker, much as if we lived in an animal society rather than in a human society" (*PP* 33). The stronger, he noted, "have always known how to bend every custom and magisterial ordinance so that the profit is theirs and the loss belongs to the weaker" (33). Even when leaders were interested in protecting the weak, Kuyper observed that the "more powerful class of society soon knew how to exercise such an

overpowering influence that the government, which should have protected the weak, became an instrument against them." This is not only a political problem. For Kuyper, the weak were just as sinful as the strong (witness Rwanda or Somalia today), and if in power, the weak could as easily become as oppressive as the powerful. However, Kuyper believed that the rich were more capable of acting out their evil intentions than were the poor. Kuyper agreed with Bilderdijk, the leader of the Dutch *Reveil*, that "God has not willed that one should drudge hard and yet have no bread for himself and his family. Still less has God willed that any man with hands to work and a will to work should perish from hunger or be reduced to the beggar's staff just because there is no work" (*PP* 61). In short, for Kuyper, the mere existence of hunger, poverty, and unemployment is anathema and revulsion to God himself! Oppression and injustice at any level was an evil to be named and resisted. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said years after Kuyper, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

For Kuyper, the suffering of the poor was not only an ideological concern, but a practical and international one. Those who suffer, he said, "are your brothers, sharers of your nature, your own flesh and blood" (*PP* 76). The greatest example of divine compassion for the poor was of course to be found in the life of Christ. Kuyper pointed out that the current "social problem" paralleled the problems of Jesus' day. "Then, just as now, the balance between the classes was lost, defiant luxury existed alongside of crying poverty, immense accumulations of capital alongside beggarly poverty concealed in the slums of Rome. Corruption in government followed inevitably from these conditions" (*PP* 35-36). Christ, "although he was rich, became poor for your sake so he might make you rich." The God who was in Christ—born in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes—was more at home with the poor, homeless, prostitutes, and outcasts (the "sinners" of his society) than with the rich and powerful, for he had "not a place to lay his head." Jesus went through wealthy Judea and the despised region of Galilee, "the circle of the nations," addressing the needs—spiritual and material—of the wretched. Jesus critiqued the unbridled accumulation of wealth and the tyrannical use of power by both religious and political authorities. Jesus and the ancient Israelite prophets unequivocally denounced such injustice and called the authorities to fulfil their role to defend the weak, protect the vulnerable, and to provide for the poor.

Kuyper claimed that wealth in and of itself was not an evil unless it was accumulated at the expense of the poor. It was evil when it led to usury, exploitation, and the manipulation of the poor. Kuyper practiced his own version of what we would today call the "bias for the poor." In this he modeled Christ: "When rich and poor stood opposed to one another, he [Jesus of Nazareth] never took his place with the wealthier but always with the poorer" (*PP* 38). On earth, Jesus had more in common with the homeless and those on the margins of society than with the wealthy and the powerful. But his vision was not confined to the present situation; it was essentially a religious and "eschatological" vision, centered in the coming kingdom of God. For Jesus, political and social realities were at best only shadows of a deeper religious and theological reality. Similarly, Kuyper believed that the fundamental problem facing human societies was more theological than political. "No, the cause of evil lay in this: that men regarded humanity as cut off from its eternal destiny, did not honor it as created in the image of God, and did not reckon with the majesty of the Lord, who alone by his grace is able to hold in check a human race mired in sin" (34).

Kuyper believed that it was the responsibility of every sphere to work for a just society. The church could not do it alone: the government must play a role. Even in ancient Israel governments had a responsibility to address social matters. Government laws for gleaning, the tithe, the Sabbath, and the Jubilee years were designed to provide the poor, hired laborers, and sojourners (migrant workers) the essentials of life. The prophets were very concerned that rulers rule justly, that the court system protect the poor from extortion, and that either a temple system or a court system protect the social fabric. For the prophets, social justice and morality were religious values connected with the transcendent. Kuyper put it this way:

> Actually, however, there has never been a government in any country of the world which did not in various ways govern the course of social life and its relationship to material wealth. Governments have done this directly through a variety of regulations in civil law and trade law, and indirectly through constitutional law and criminal law. More particularly, governments have acted through inheritance laws, systems of taxation, export and import regulations, codes for purchase and rent, agrarian regulations, colonial administration, control of coinage, and much more. (*PP* 32)

When delineating the role that government should play in developing a just society, Kuyper was very careful. His political views found a middle ground between conservative individualism and collectivist socialism. He was acutely aware that powerful rulers often manipulated government and thus failed to fulfill their God-given responsibilities–especially their call to punish evil and protect those who cannot protect themselves. He also believed that the government of his day was poorly founded, for it was developed without reference to the transcendent. Kuyper worried that the ideals of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment had overtaken political functions. He feared that their more lofty ideals—liberty, fraternity, equality—would be overshadowed by a rationalist, pragmatist, secularist, and morally relativistic model. Kuyper believed that the Enlightenment spirit contributed to pride, license, individualism, and a self-seeking lust after material goods—"the most brutal egoism" (*PP* 52). In a worse-case scenario, the political process would be characterized less by reason and more by the violence, terror, and oppression of arbitrary rule, leading eventually to anarchy and a loss of moral standards.

Kuyper's critique of the French Revolution as a symbol of all secularized governments and materialist cultures is penetrating:

> It compelled men to seek happiness on earth, in earthly things, and thus created a sphere of lower pressures in which money was the standard of value, so that everything was sacrificed for money. Now add the demolition of all social organization, followed by proclamation of the mercantile gospel of laissez faire, and you can understand how the "struggle for life" was ushered in by the "struggle for money." (*PP* 45-46)

The consequence of secularism and the ascendancy of corporate capitalism was not quite a tyranny of aristocrats as in the eighteenth century, but rather a division of society along class lines—a powerful *nouveau riche* emerging as a new aristocracy based on money and power without the kinship relationships of the old aristocracy. "Thus, in all of Europe a well-to-do bourgeoisie rules over an impoverished working class, which exists to increase the wealth of the ruling class and is doomed, when it can no longer serve that purpose, to sink away into the morass of the proletariat" (*PP* 47). But Kuyper illustrates that greed is a

Kuyper's views came closest to those of the social democrats, yet with an odd theological grounding in evangelical Calvinism.

human condition that transcends social class: "the luxurious bourgeoisie makes a display of its luxury, exciting a false desire in the poorer classes" (*PP* 47). In the late nineteenth century the rich displayed their wealth in public, shaming the poor. Today, the rich display their opulence via market values and consumer goods over the media airwaves, shaming the poor in more subtle ways. One wonders if we who claim to be heirs of the gospel today can look self-critically at our economic system, especially in an age of globalization and political neo-liberalism.

Kuyper rejected the idea that hope could not be found in the lair of big business–the monopoly corporate capitalists who "by virtue of absolute ownership, [heap up] immeasurable fortunes producing an insurmountable obstacle that hinders society from doing justice to its own sociological character" (*PP* 54-55). In this respect, Kuyper was critical of Adam Smith and laissez-faire individualism. People may be prone to act on their own self-interest, but that was different from what is demanded of us from the gospel.

Kuyper challenged the notion of individual ownership of property, which, for conservatives, was a right. He argued that Scripture excluded the

right to take or dispose of property absolutely, as though one were God, without due consideration of the needs of the poor and the landless. Kuyper decried the fact that in the Scotland of the 1890's, two-thirds of the land was owned by fourteen persons. (This is similar to land ownership in the Third World–e.g. El Salvador–in the 1990's.) But Kuyper also rejected the socialist position that all individual property should be turned over to the state and to collective ownership. He held that "absolute property belongs only to God; all of our property is on loan from him; our management is only stewardship" (*PP* 68). Only the Lord can grant the responsibility of managing the land. For Kuyper, "the fruitful field is given by God to all the people so that every tribe in Israel might dwell on it and live from it" (*PP* 68). It was a mistake to believe that God's ordinances applied only to the salvation of souls, and not also for national existence and "our common social life." Although not specifically named, such a view goes to the heart of the Old Testament vision of *shalom*–a just peace that results in prosperity and harmony in society. Jeremiah the prophet was also "anti-revolutionary," in that he counseled an exiled people to seek the *shalom* of pagan Babylon rather than a violent insurrection or timid flight (Jeremiah 29:7). Such ordinances apply to how we order our social life in the present, not just to eternal rewards in the hereafter.

Kuyper did not display much hope in a government whose foundation was individual free will: "The French Revolution . . . left nothing but the monotonous, self-seeking individual asserting his own self-sufficiency" (*PP* 44). Kuyper concluded that the Enlightenment model was opposed to the gospel because it created more injustice and inequality than would a model informed by a Christian worldview. "In the Christian religion, authority and freedom are bound together by the deeper principle that everything in creation is subject to God" (*PP* 43). Only by acknowledging God as sovereign King and submitting to His will for all creatures would the earth see peace and justice.

Kuyper was suspicious of individualistic Enlightenment ideals, but he also critiqued the collectivism of state socialism as an answer to the problems caused by the industrial revolution. Socialism was very popular in the 1890's, but Kuyper recognized within it serious flaws. Kuyper assailed several kinds of socialists including nihilists, anarchists, social democrats, and state socialists. His views came closest to those of the social democrats, yet with an odd theological grounding in evangelical Calvinism. On the one hand, Kuyper did agree with the socialist analysis of the human situation in history. He wrote, "Whenever one uses the phrase 'social question,' one recognizes, in the most general sense, that serious doubt has arisen about the soundness of the social structure in which we live" (*PP* 50). Similar to other social gospelers of the day, Kuyper believed that the problems facing human beings, especially laborers and the poor, were connected not to their lack of virtue, but to "a fault in the very foundation of our society's organization"; that is, to its social structures, economic and political systems, and failed policies that allowed monopoly capital to oppress the masses of people. It seemed obvious that a new, more livable social order must be built.

On the other hand, Kuyper did not believe that socialism was the right way to build this social order. Kuyper criticized the socialist "solution" for four reasons. First, its program would be established not on the free exercise of the people via a democratic political process but via a violent revolution. Kuyper resonated more with the conservatives here by asserting that such a course would result in another form of tyranny, a state-run bureaucracy. Like many Fabians or Bernsteinian socialists, he supported change in a gradual, not revolutionary manner. He advocated the democratic process as a vehicle of change, as people acted on their faith and values. Kuyper had more faith in the power of the people to make a difference for themselves in a peaceful way, especially when motivated by Christian faith. Even more importantly, Kuyper's theory of gradual, lawful change rested on respect for human authority as ordained by God. He felt that it was the Christian duty to "warn against all violation of authority and to oppose bravely every act of force and lawlessness" (*PP* 66). Kuyper followed Jesus himself, who was not a political revolutionary but a religious reformer. Kuyper preferred tactics similar to the nonviolent

resistance of Mahatma Ghandi or Martin Luther King, Jr.

Second, Kuyper criticized socialism because it was essentially humanistic. Like the Enlightenment model, socialism made no reference to a transcendent other. Socialists sought to put together a political program based solely on human ingenuity and creativity. For Kuyper, any humanistic program was doomed from the start due to sin. Third, socialists were secular materialists. Materialism reduced humanity to the realm of nature and hence robbed human beings of their dignity as beings created in the *imago dei.* Although Kuyper would agree with his contemporary William Temple that the Christian faith, because of its this-worldly concerns, "is the most materialistic of all religions," it was impossible for Kuyper to conceive of a world in secular terms, as a world without God. The world could exist and have meaning only because of a contingent relationship with a Sovereign Creator, not *sui generis* (from its own origin). Finally, the socialist hope or utopia was always directed towards tomorrow, for there were few meaningful examples of a successful socialist utopia, present or past. Kuyper asserted that it was better to leave future hopes in the hands of the Lord of history than in the fabrications of mere human beings. The future, he believed, is based on revealed truth, not mere human forecasting.

Kuyper believed that the movement of society in his day was turning against "the individualism of the French Revolution, born from its denial of human community" (*PP* 52), and from socialist dreams. Kuyper believed that a solution to the "social problem" could be found only in a "God-willed community." The Bible taught that all are created in God's image and all are under sin. This pointed first to the doctrine of common grace, but also to "an interconnected wholeness of our human society. . . . God's word teaches that we have all been created from one blood and joined in a single covenant through God" (*PP* 65). This interconnectedness and solidarity of guilt and hope was totally incompatible with the individualism and materialism of secular culture. Kuyper called for the rediscovery of community with a transcendent, religious base: not an individualized piety, nor a communal sectarianism, but the establishment of a community based on a theological foundation of peace with justice emanating from the gospel. A social movement based on the foundation of neo-Calvinism would give hope and motivation, Kuyper claimed, for something quite different from what he called "head-in-the-sand-politics." Rather, "The common characteristic of this imposing movement is to be found in the swelling of community feeling,—feeling for social justice and for the organic nature of society,—over against the one-dimensional individualism of the French Revolution and its corresponding economic school of laissez-faire" (*PP* 54).

Kuyper recognized that poverty... resulted directly from structural inequalities, from sin working itself out in policy and institutional organization.

"The first article of any social program," wrote Kuyper, is therefore, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth" (*PP* 64). One must first acknowledge that it is God who orders nature and that the human conscience is subservient to His will. Kuyper said further, "We as Christians must place the strongest possible emphasis on the majesty of God's authority and on the absolute validity of his ordinances, so that, even as we condemn the rotting social structure of our day, we will never try to erect any structure except one that rests on foundations laid by God" (*PP* 64).

Kuyper argued that this community must incorporate a biblical vision. The Old Testament commonwealth of Israel provided for the poorest of the poor and was assailed by the prophets when she did not. In the New Testament, Jesus proclaimed that the gospel's primary recipients were the poor and, by advocating social justice beyond charity, suggested a social program in principle. Central to Jesus' program was the development of a new community that reflected the values of the kingdom of God, values such as

compassion for the poor and the pursuit of peace with justice by those in power. Jesus was, in a sense, a community organizer. He set apart a group of followers and sent them out to influence society in a number of concrete ways. First was the ministry of the word, the proclamation of a new realm. "He [Jesus] constantly fights against lust for money, comforts the poor and the oppressed, and points to an endless glory that will be exchanged for the suffering of the present time" (*PP* 40). Second, the new community organized a ministry of charity, whereby goods were shared among the people so that no one suffered from want. Third, the new community modeled equality among the brotherhood "by abolishing all artificial demarcation between men and by joining rich and poor in one holy food at the Lord's Supper" (41). Kuyper summarized Jesus' program as follows:

> Earthly welfare no longer weighed heaviest in public estimation; eternal well-being also carried weight. Slavery was snapped at its root and underwent a moral criticism that sapped it as an institution. Men began to be concerned about caring for the poor and for orphans. Accumulation of too much capital was checked by the prohibition of usury. Higher and lower classes approached each other more freely on a more equal footing. (41-42)

Jesus' new community practiced charity, but Kuyper was careful to give that concept new meaning. Kuyper viewed charity as it was understood by the Church and society to be an ineffective and insufficient way to address the problem of poverty. The poor needed jobs, not just handouts. Charity by itself was less than what the gospel demands, even though it was easier for churches to give money than to pursue social justice. Kuyper wrote:

> But I hasten to add that *a charity which knows only how to give money is not yet Christian love*. You will be free of guilt only when you also give your time, your energy, and your resourcefulness to help end such abuses for good, and when you allow nothing that lies hidden in the storehouse of your Christian religion to remain unused against the cancer that is destroying the vitality of our society in such alarming ways. For indeed, the material need is appalling; the oppression is great. You do not honor God's word if, in these circumstances, you never forget how the Christ (just as the prophets before him and the apostles after him) invariably took sides *against* those who were powerful and living in luxury, and *for* the suffering and oppressed. (*PP* 62, italics added)

In Bible story after Bible story, such as that of Lazarus and the rich man, "crumbs" from the table were not enough. Mere charity insulted the dignity of the poor man, while true compassion invited and welcome him to the communion table and to the community as a true brother, a friend to the family of God. For Kuyper, "divine compassion, sympathy, a suffering with and for us–was the mystery of Golgotha." Kuyper believed that charity was essential to address the temporary needs of the poor, but he commented further:

> If you . . . think that social evil can be exorcised through an increase in piety, or through friendlier treatment or more generous charity, then you may believe that we face a religious question or possibly a philanthropic question, but you will not recognize the social question. This question does not exist for you until you exercise an architectonic critique of human society, which leads to the desire for a different arrangement of the social order. (*PP* 52)

He admitted, "Obviously, the poor man cannot wait until the restoration of our social structure has been completed. Almost certainly he will not live long enough to see that happy day. Nevertheless, he still has to live; he must feed his hungry mouth and the mouths of his hungry family" (*PP* 77). Charity was important, but it must be accompanied by a hard look at the very structure of society. For Kuyper, the problem of poverty was structural and institutional, a moral problem for the rich, an economic and political problem for the poor.

While Kuyper rejected the individualism and rationalism of turn-of-the-century conservatives, he would appreciate modern-day conservatives' emphasis on family values. He held that the family structure and marriage were divine orders, essential to preserve a just social order. Kuyper attacked both "free love" practice that would undermine the family and an unjust economy that made it difficult for a family to survive. He criticized the lifestyle and values of those who would compromise family values. And, just as fervently,

he criticized any social structure that could not provide the opportunity and necessary resources for the family to provide for itself the essentials of life: food, shelter and meaningful work. For Kuyper, the family is portrayed in Scripture as "the wonderful creation though which the rich fabric of our organic human life must spin itself out" (*PP* 69). He urged that workers be protected and provided for, that they might find work and that they might survive economically if sick, injured or aged. "To mistreat the workman as a 'piece of machinery' is and remains a violation of his human dignity and, we might add, an insidious attack on the divine institution of the family!" (*PP* 71)

Kuyper saw a false dichotomy between society and the state: the social democrats wanted a society without a state (popular sovereignty), while the socialists wanted a state that would supplant the sovereignty of God. "Against both of these," Kuyper wrote, "we as Christians must hold that the state and society each has its own sphere, its own sovereignty, and that the social question cannot be resolved rightly unless we respect this duality and thus honor state authority as clearing the way for a free society" (*PP* 65). Yet Kuyper rejected the welfare state. He believed that the state should contribute minimally. He envisioned a highly decentralized government in which local associations such as unions, churches, and other community-based organizations would address best the welfare of the poor. For Kuyper, the government must execute justice but not invade other spheres of life such as the family, business, church, or the arts. In this delicate balance, "government should help labor obtain justice. Labor must be allowed to organize itself independently in order to defend its rights" (*PP* 72).

Kuyper considered it the duty of all "Children of the Kingdom" to seize every moment to impress upon all those rich and poor that the peace of God is the ultimate hope and that it has concrete social consequences. The practice of *true* charity by Christian congregations and households is an imperative, even as we also organize ourselves in a political way to address the causes, not just the results, of social injustice. Ultimately, for Kuyper, it is the question of community, of Christian community. Are we able, like Mother Theresa, John Wesley, Dorothy Day, or even like Abraham Kuyper, to see in the poor not only the face of Christ, but also the face of our own brothers and sisters? "The question on which the whole social problem really pivots is whether you recognize in the less fortunate, even in the poorest, not merely a creature, a person in wretched circumstances, but one of your own flesh and blood: for the sake of Christ, your brother [and sister]" (*PP* 75). While we may take comfort in the great eschatological hope of the coming Kingdom of God to be established one day–"on earth as it is in heaven"–the Christian community has a full plate of things to do in the interim. We are called to witness to the reality of the coming Kingdom in our daily lives and in the practice of community in the present. In the interim, the Christian community must dedicate itself to serving the needy and pursuing a social justice that renders charity unnecessary.

The best way to achieve welfare reform is not "to end welfare as we know it," but to end poverty as a condition that requires welfare.

Conclusion

The theology of Abraham Kuyper is relevant for developing a Christian view of welfare reform. For Kuyper, all societal institutions must work to rid the world of injustice. All spheres must practice not only charity, but must seek justice for the poor. Yet Kuyper's thought remains distinct from the optimistic, mainstream social gospel tradition. First, Kuyper believed in the sovereignty of God: ultimately, all governmental institutions and all social spheres are subject to God the Creator's rule and will. Secondly, Kuyper analyzed the social problem from Scripture, not from political ideology. Kuyper's concern for compassion and for social justice is largely derived from his interpretation of the prophets and the ministry of

Jesus of Nazareth. Third, Kuyper believed that all human beings, and thus all human instrumentalities as well, are tainted by sin. The problem was that the wealthy and the powerful were more apt to misuse their power to advance their own status. Finally, Kuyper's theology did not advance a socialist utopia or a political ideology from a mere human point of view. Rooted in the gospel, Kuyper looked for a redeemed community of Christians who might work to redeem the world as God's creation. This redemptive work included the reform of social systems, as well as individuals.

Kuyper recognized that poverty was not the fault of the poor as a class but resulted directly from structural inequalities, from sin working itself out in policy and institutional organization. Hence systemic and structural solutions that looked at public policy options and the implications of the political economy are necessary if poverty is to be dealt with adequately. In short, the best way to protect families and "family values" is to insure that the economic and social conditions provide life's necessities and a general sense of well-being. To insist that the poor do their part in taking responsibility to improve their situation is justifiable. But to assume that poverty results solely from the behavior and immorality of the poor is unjust and, frankly, mean-spirited. As Kuyper noted, it is the social structure and its opportunities that need reform, even as the capacities of individuals to productively participate in society needs strengthening. The Christian community must actively seek such renewal.

For Kuyper, community-based organizations must play a role in eradicating poverty. However, the best way to achieve welfare reform is not "to end welfare as we know it," but to end poverty as a condition that requires welfare. Kuyper knew that the poor, given skills and opportunity, would no longer be poor. He knew that the overwhelming majority of poor people did not choose to be poor but found themselves in poverty through no fault of their own. He also knew that the overwhelming majority of the able-bodied poor do in fact want to work. He would thus agree with contemporary "welfare to work" projects. But, he argued, real jobs must be accompanied by just wages, ones high enough to lift people out of poverty and dependence. "The workman deserves his wages!" Society, that is, all spheres of society, must insure that such jobs are available.

Tragically, many welfare reformers today assume that the majority of those who are the poor, —children, women, elderly, and those with infirmities,—can fend for themselves. For welfare reform to really take hold, business, labor, churches, as well as all levels of government, must not leave these people alone but rather show compassion to them. Compassion is more than a favorable attitude, but an active identification and solidarity with those on the margin. Our own peace and welfare are connected with the welfare and peace of everyone in society, especially the poor. Yes, we are our brother's keeper.

The welfare of society was the great question of Kuyper's day, as it must be in ours. We must analyze what causes poverty, how we can prevent it, and what societal structures and which people are responsible for it. With Kuyper, we seek to relieve the pain of the oppressed, not because it is politically correct, but because of our gospel mandate. As Jesus said, quoting from the book of Isaiah, "He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, and release for those who are captive" (Luke 4:18). For Kuyper, common grace exists not only to restrain evil and injustice, but also to invite believers to engage in culture at every level. It "provided an incentive and justification for active Christian pursuit of cultural renewal" (Heslam 270). For believers everywhere, cultural renewal means we have a mandate to pursue the common welfare, the just peace of our cities and countryside, especially for those made vulnerable and dispensable by the "architectonic structure" of modern society. As the prophet Jeremiah (29:7) said to the Israelite exiles in pagan Babylon, "Seek the peace of the city, for in its peace you will find your peace."

END NOTES

1. This was similar to the position of the Knights of Labor in the United States, a benign socialist movement different from more radical organizations such as the International Workers of the World. Like the K of L, Kuyper eschewed violence, agitation, and the general strike in any form.
2. *Lectures on Calvinism*, a re-publication of the Stone Lectures given at Princeton University in 1898, will henceforth be referred to as *LC*.

3. *The Problem of Poverty* will henceforth be referred to as *PP.*
4. Given the context, we may assume that Kuyper was referring to "man" in the generic sense, although he did believe that suffrage was to be limited to the male head of the family, men in the more restrictive sense.
5. Common grace has been variously interpreted as an antitheses to special revelation or as a means to encourage believers to engage the secular culture. Those of the "antithetical school" tend to emphasize Christian distinctiveness from the culture. This writer finds in Kuyper a mandate for engagement, not withdrawal. For more discussion, see Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 18-19; and James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in America: A history of a conservative subculture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984).
6. The Neville Brothers are a contemporary African-American band from New Orleans who blend jazz and gospel music with civil rights themes.
7. Heslam discusses the development of *verzuiling* in Kuyper's and later Dutch political thought. *Verzuiling* is the doctrine of separate pillars, a pillarized society, as developed in South Africa's apartheid society. To this writer, Kuyper's political perspective suggests a political pluralism but not a pillarization of society. See Heslam, 24-25 ff; and to the contray, P.J. Strauss, "Abraham Kuyper, Apartheid and Reformed Churches in South Africa in Their Support of Apartheid," *Theological Forum* 23 (1995): 4-27.

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