
Pro Rege

Volume 46 | Number 3

Article 4

March 2018

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Recommended Citation

Gousmett, Chris (2018) "A Letter to Dr. Sacha Walicord," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 46:

No. 3, 29 - 33.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol46/iss3/4

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A Letter to Dr. Sacha Walicord



by Chris Gousmett

Dear Dr. Walicord,

I often read *Pro Rege* with interest, as it contains important articles on matters of significance which are pertinent to our calling to discipleship. The vision of Kuyper that the whole of human life is to be brought into subjection to Christ is

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one that is frequently voiced with approval. It is a vision which inspires and motivates many of us world-wide in our efforts to be faithful in all that we do.

It was a surprise, then, to read your review of Gary North's book, *Christian Economics in One Lesson* (http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol46/iss1/6/). While I do not pretend to any expertise in economics, I wish to challenge the approach you have taken in your review because I believe it is taking a mistaken path, one which does not do credit to the Lord whom we serve.

While you start with Kuyper's famous rallying cry, in what follows you espouse an understanding of economics which is radically different from that of many of Kuyper's spiritual followers. You seem to hold that both Kuyper's followers, and Kuyper himself, are inconsistent in applying biblical principles to economic life, given that you state that biblically consistent publications in economics and politics are a "rarity in our day and age." This does not ring true for those of us who are familiar with, for instance, the works of Bob Goudzwaard, Jim Skillen and Alan Storkey. Their vision for economics and for politics is pervasively informed by the Scriptures, while being academically thorough in their analysis and proposals for reform. You do not refer to these authors and their work, while asserting that economics is under-served in the application of biblical teaching to that subject. There are others who have also worked on developing a biblically faithful approach to economics within the Kuyperian tradition: to name but a few, Tony Cramp, George Monsma and John Tiemstra. Many of these draw on the work of Christian

economists working in the Kuyperian tradition in earlier generations, such as T. P. van der Kooy. While these authors (and others also working in the same Kuyperian spirit) may not be well known, and are certainly not as numerous or as influential as we may like, it would be doing a disservice to them and their potential readers (who otherwise may not be spurred to seek them out) to describe biblical works in economics as a “rarity.” There have also been a significant number of authors writing on politics in a biblically faithful approach, such as Bernie Zylstra, Paul Marshall, Jonathan Chaplin, Sander Griffioen, David Koyzis, Romel Bagares, Rockne McCarthy and Richard Mouw, and again those of earlier generations: Jan Dengerink, Herman Dooyeweerd, Antheunis Janse, and others.

Would it then be correct to assume that you place these thinkers in the category of the “biblically inconsistent” or who only pay “lip service” to God’s Word, or are part of the “sometimes biblically inconsistent, ivory-tower transformationalist crowd”? Is that why you do not mention their work even in passing, hurrying on to laud the works of Gary North, whose views are inescapably incompatible with those of the writers mentioned above?

You mention that Kuyper’s inconsistencies led to the democratic-welfare state in the Netherlands. Whether the modern Dutch welfare state can be attributed to (or blamed on) Kuyper is probably debatable, but clearly you see a connection between the beliefs he espoused and the eventual emergence of the welfare state. Leaving aside the historical validity of this connection for others to explore, it is true that Kuyper had significant concern for the welfare of the poorer folk of his day, as can be seen from his stirring address at the First Christian Social Congress in The Netherlands in 1891 (*The Problem of Poverty*, translated by Jim Skillen). The politics and economics of Kuyper cannot easily be slotted into “socialist” or “capitalist” or other categories, since he made strenuous efforts (however unsuccessfully at times) to be biblical in his approach. He must be given credit for his achievement in pursuing that goal and for his influence in this regard such that nearly 100 years after his death his

work is still being studied for guidance in how to live faithfully before the Lord in every area of life.

Many of us who read Goudzwaard, Skillen, and Storkey with appreciation also have some acquaintance with at least the basic approach, if not the details, of the views of Gary North and others in that line of thought. It is not an approach which appeals to us, not because we are closet Marxists or humanistic in our thinking but because we read the Bible in a different way from North. Those in the Kuyperian tradition have clearly demarcated their views from the Marxists and other humanist thinkers. Indeed, Antheunis Janse frequently emphasised that the common error of Marxists, Socialists, Capitalists and others is that the economic side of life was elevated to a position of dominance over everything else, supplanting the Lord of Glory, who alone rules over all of life. This criticism would apply to the Austrian school of economics of Hayek and von Mises, who, it appears, have influenced Gary North more than other thinkers.

Those who differ from North you describe a number of times as “biblically inconsistent” while North is described several times as “biblically consistent” or “consistently biblical.” You do not state anywhere what “biblically consistent” means, but it seemingly does not apply, in your view, to those who hold views which differ from those espoused by North. Perhaps you could enlighten us as to what you consider “consistency” with Scripture means and why you seem to privilege this term over others such as “faithful to Scripture.” Surely consistency means more than following the principles of a tight logical system, which appears to originate more from humanist economic and political theories than from Scripture. One of the criticisms of the approach taken by North and those who follow him has been the way in which Scripture is interpreted in a rigid and fundamentalistic manner, which pays scant attention to context (textual, historical, social, political, etc.) that urges the application of OT law immediately to our contemporary situation. North’s approach is not the only one which claims to bring the insights of the whole of Scripture to bear on contemporary life in a way which is faithful to the one True King. It would

seem to me that North is significantly less successful in this task than many others, including those already mentioned.

I would be interested to hear from you how different North's approach is from that of Hazlitt, whose book, which he has re-written, was the stimulus for your review. You clearly say that North takes Hazlitt's libertarian work and puts it into a Christian context. You say that the book has been re-written on a biblical-moral foundation instead of a foundation in humanistic pragmatism. Those who follow Kuyper and Dooyeweerd would question whether a libertarian work can be used as the basis for a Christian approach without doing serious distortion to both. Frankly, the presuppositions and approach taken by libertarian economists are hardly compatible with a biblical view of life. Is this then not just another instance of the fallacy of synthesis thinking, in which secular humanistic views are melded with biblical concepts into a mixture of iron and clay? Such a synthesis cannot be authentically either humanistic or Christian. While North and others of that school are more than happy to critique the foundational principles of socialists and Marxists, they seem strangely reticent to apply the same depth of critique to the foundational principles of capitalism (and not just the pragmatistic avoidance of morality). It raises the question as to why North did not write a book from scratch instead of adopting and adapting one originating from an unbiblical perspective.

The differences between North and the Kuyperian tradition can be seen, for instance, in the latter's approach to the Bible, in which the task of government is understood positively. North objects to government "intrusion" into the social order. Following North, it seems, you speak negatively of the government multiple times, using such terms as "intrusions," "excessive intrusions," or "violation of property rights." Such polemics are unhelpful when what we need to know is how we should understand the proper

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task of government, and what principles and policies would be best to enable free and prosperous human life, without the distortions of free-market (neo-liberal) policies that benefit, above others, the wealthy, the multi-national corporations, and the financiers, who often do their utmost to avoid paying any tax at all, let alone the minimal amount they seem to pay.

What unfortunately is communicated by the kinds of polemics you offer against government and its "intrusions" and "violations" is support for those who seek to avoid contributing to the public coffers to fund the activities of government, while the extremes of their wealth sits alongside the economic hardship and struggles of millions in the same society who have to do without adequate food, clothing, employment, education, shelter and health care, to mention but a few of their needs.

Can you not see that the constant reiteration of the theme that anything governments do in relation to the economy is "intervention" or "intrusion" contributes to a denigration of government *per se* and fosters not positive civil virtues in citizens but fear and suspicion? I struggled to find anything positive said about government in North's book. There seems to be a Manichean spirit running through his works, which makes government (in any form, since it seems that all he can say about government is to attack its every action as "intrusion") something to be feared and resisted, while an economy free from regulation is extolled as good and desirable. For North, it seems, taxation is always "theft." Can there be any good thing done by government (apart from protecting the economy from any interference) and can any form of taxation be anything but "theft"? It seems not from what you say.

Perhaps you could provide a positive description of the task of government, which is "God's servant for your good" (Romans 13:4). Can there be a legitimate government that does more than the barest possible minimum (whatever that minimum)? Can you explain why the

Scriptures throughout speak of God's relationship to the creation and the people within it in political terms—God “rules”; he is “King”; he issues laws—if government is so lacking in legitimacy? Surely disparaging government is to speak slightly of the King not only who gives us government but who also adopts that imagery for his own relationship with us (not exclusively, of course, but extensively).

The focus for those who take a different line, more closely aligned with that of Kuyper, is not the extent to which government engages with society (as if there were a simple measure of more or less, with the “correct” level somewhere on that scale) but the appropriateness of the engagement that should take place. There is no doubt that there is an appropriate task for government in Christian political theory and practice. In addition to the clear teaching of Scripture in which government is spoken of as God's servant, it is also clear that the phenomenon of government is grounded in the creation order, as there is nothing that can exist save that which has been provided for by God in his order for creation. This is so, despite the fact that government (and every other area of life) has been distorted and contaminated by human sin—the creational order in which it is founded still remains in place, sustained by God in every way. Were there no basis in the creation order for the phenomenon of government, then it could not exist. Clearly, then, government is not merely legitimate but helpful for us. That many governments around the world are tyrannical, despotic, or otherwise corrupt does not detract from the fact that government is a gift from God for the good of humankind. It is the way it is used and abused that needs correction, and all too often we find that it is rampant, free-market capitalism through neo-liberal ideology which props up the worst forms of government around the world for its own economic benefit. It has been said of some of the repressive anti-democratic dictatorships which imposed free-market ideology while engaged in brutality against unions or others who protested the actions of the government, that “people had to be imprisoned so that the market could be free.”

You say that compassion for the poor is not

compatible with government-forced redistribution, and that this is theft in violation of the commandment “You shall not steal.” At this point your support for minimal government, minimal tax (if any), and no redistribution simply undercuts any claim to be presenting a Christian faithful concern for the **whole** of society, not just for those who have managed to secure massive amounts of wealth. You suggest that compassion for the poor and distribution of funds should be voluntary. Unfortunately, this is not what we find with the massively wealthy—they do not support the poor. In fact their wealth is often garnered through enterprises which pay wages so low it is almost impossible to live on them, and from manipulating their finances to minimise whatever taxes they cannot completely avoid. The kinds of political and economic views you espouse here are of one piece with those who advocate rampant neo-liberal free-market economics and are a poor reflection of the depth and richness of insight into economic and political realities which has been presented by the various authors mentioned above (along with others I have not mentioned).

The focus on “theft” seems to arise from North's contention that the eighth commandment, “You shall not steal,” is the principal basis for any sound economic perspective. This seems to place far too great a burden on a few words (four in English, two in Hebrew). There are many more substantive discussions of economic life in the Old Testament, which surely indicate that economics goes far beyond simply a proscription of theft and exaltation of property rights. And to extend that proscription to rejection of the right of governments to raise funds by taxation is simply unsupportable by sound exegesis. This fact can be seen even more starkly in North's claim in his book that the sin of Adam and Eve in taking the fruit of the tree was a breach of the prohibition against theft—in fact he says that this first prohibition in the Bible is the prohibition against theft and promotion of property rights. This view is simply astonishing. Surely the sin of Adam and Eve involves more than theft? That this is not a misreading of North is confirmed by the fact that he makes the same comment three times in

his book, each time expressing the view that the sin of Adam and Eve was theft. While they did steal the fruit, what was involved was not simply a breach of God's property rights (which is what North makes it seem) but a life-encompassing breach of covenant, which affected Adam and Eve in every way. Their sin was a religious change of orientation of the heart away from obedience to God towards a false authority, a false pretence to autonomy, which established idolatry at their very core. Seeing it simply as "theft" fails to do justice to the depth and extent of their disobedience.

It would be of interest to those who follow Kuyper's line to know more about your reasons for considering Gary North to be consistent in applying the Scriptures to economics, and whether you consider Goudzwaard, Skillen and Storkey to be inconsistent, ivory-tower thinkers, along with Kuyper. Surely you have not dismissed their views in a cavalier manner without considering their work carefully, but since their views are not compatible with those of Gary North, I would be interested to hear what it is exactly that you find unsatisfying in their approach.

You have commended North's book to any interested Christian who wants to be a responsible citizen and an obedient child of God in all areas of life. For the reasons given above, I suggest that rather than a biblically faithful presentation of political and economic life, North's book presents a narrow, constricted, and suspect perspective that fails to do adequate justice to the breadth and depth of life in all its complexity or to the drastic consequences of sin in all its horror and power. It does not present a vision that opens up Christian discipleship in all of life, but to the contrary, it distorts the teaching of Scripture in significant ways and reduces its view of economics to a very constricted vision. There are many books by other Christian authors that do a much more effective job in presenting the calling for faithfulness to God in all of life and specifically for economics. I would encourage you to give them due consideration and reflect on the limitations they expose in the approach taken by North.

Yours in Christ,
Chris Gousmett