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Some Thoughts on Government and Constitution from the Protestant Perspective

by Zsolt Szabó

Contemporary state and political theory—at least in Central and Eastern Europe—still fails to recognize the extent to which the Reformation and Calvinist thought on state and government continue to influence our perception of democracy. Instead, socialist historiography and state theory continue to have an impact in the region, and the most important starting point for such assessments is typically the 1789 Revolution. Thus, for example, the edited volume by Kukorelli István notes only two constitutions being influenced by Calvinism: the Utrecht Union (1584) and the Geneva church constitution (1541). It also contends that Calvin’s influence remained isolated and, unlike the French Revolution, did not influence European history.

Nevertheless, all four major elements of the dominant liberal democracy canon—separation of powers, rule of law, fundamental freedoms, and popular sovereignty—are rooted in Protestantism rather than in the philosophies of the French Revolution. Consequently, I argue in this article that the real “enlightenment” in history and state theory was the Reformation, as it liberated mankind from both state and religious slavery and made them directly subordinate to God, thereby contributing to the idea of equality among human beings. These ideas are made clear from Kuyper’s writings, which provide a coherent system of thought that rejects the French Revolution path and are based on the political theories of liberal Christianity and political Calvinism. Kuyper stated that “Calvinism has led public law into new paths, first in Western Europe, then in two Continents, and today more and more among all civilized nations, is admitted by all scientific students, if not yet fully by public opinion”; Kuyper tells us to look at the political changes that have taken place “in the three historic lands of political freedom, the Netherlands, England, and America.”

In this article I endeavour to reveal the Calvinist foundation that undergirds today’s understanding of constitutional democracy. I will first present some of the elements of the Protestant, especially Calvinist, theology of gov-
ernance, with respect to elements of modern state theory. Secondly, I will briefly examine Kuyper’s thoughts on governance as expressed in 1898 in his work entitled “The Political Importance of Calvinism.” In the final section, I conclude by bringing these two discussions together to establish that there is much in Protestant, particularly Calvinist, thought that serves to shape contemporary thinking related to democratic principles.

Part I
When considering the Protestant concept of the state and government, one must begin with one of the fundamental ideas of Protestant theology—that our salvation cannot be obtained through good behaviour on earth. Rather, it comes only through the grace of Jesus Christ. Earthly life gives Christ’s followers a chance to help unfold the plan of God, i.e., to use the opportunities offered by the Lord and the talents received from the Lord for the benefit of all and for the glory of the Lord. These efforts, done on behalf of others and one’s community, are not a punishment but a natural outcome of the life of the believer. To be engaged in politics is not just possible but necessary for Calvinists.

According to (Calvinist) protestant thinking, the state should promote this engagement in politics by supporting the promulgation of the revealed laws of God in the Bible and act as a protector and messenger of God’s kingdom. Government most probably does not exist in heaven, but it belongs on earth. The state monopoly of violence is the consequence of our sins, and thus, for the sake of the common good, the Lord has ordered government over people. According to Romans 13, all governing authorities derive their powers from God, either directly or indirectly. As a result, there is no authority except that which God has established, and Christians may not attack government by revolutions, as those who rebel against such governmental authority are rebelling against what God has instituted.

Luther contended that there are two types of supremacy: the church and the state, with God being the master over both domains. The state possesses the power of the sword. The power of the sword is needed for those who will not be obedient to the word of God. The power of the sword applies to everyone—the faithful are not above the law. Though Luther was both a theologian and a lawyer, he did not formulate a theory of the state. He contended that, since Scripture does not describe in detail how to govern, rulers must draw on either the writings of “pagan” (ancient) authors or their own common sense in their efforts at governing.

Calvin also contended that “The right of commandment was ordered by God for the benefit of man” and that the believer must be obedient to secular authority that governs people by the permissible will of God. Accordingly, Calvin also rejected revolutionary and rebellious actions as well as the teachings of the Anabaptists, who argued that, given the freedom and perfection promised and provided in the gospel, Christians did not have to obey secular and civil power.

Separation of Powers
In the Institutes, Calvin’s main work, he dedicates a whole chapter to government (Part IV Chapter 20.). He argues that even in pagan times, there were always entities that could provide a balance to the power of kings, much like parliaments in modern times. The modern theory of separation of power, or checks and balances, emerges here. Also Kuyper often mentions parliaments which have the task of giving a balance against the state.

Although Calvin recognized that different countries could have different forms of government, with each being a legitimate form of government, he preferred the republican state, with people participating in the government’s formation (a “revolutionary” innovation at the time). He opposed one-person rule and argued for the idea of aristocratic democracy, since “where power is divided into more hands, there is less danger of self-destruction.”

Fundamental Freedoms
The Reformation also led to the emergence of political liberties, with the first struggles for religious freedom occurring in England, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. The free expression of thought is the fruit of Calvinism, though
this idea also gained victory with the Glorious Revolution in England. The true freedom of man is given by God. Consequently, the king can neither give it nor restrict it. Of the various freedoms, religious freedom is essential for Protestants, as it makes possible the true worship of God. No secular power can obstruct the believer’s obedience to God through faith. According to Calvin, in the ideal government form, “freedom is matched with the appropriate moderation and is endowed with durability.” Freedom goes hand in hand with responsibility. Humans can only be free if they have full responsibility for their acts and don’t wait for the state to protect them or seek for their interests.

This idea is closely related to the principle of equal rights, which was already known in the 15th century by Hussites and then by Levellers. Given that every human being is equal, there are no prerogatives either in society or in salvation. Thus, offices in the (Protestant) Reformed Church are to be filled by electing pastors and church boards. Kuyper also emphasized that no man has the right to rule over another man. Neither the king nor the people exercised absolute sovereignty because only God exercises authority over the will of the whole mankind.

**Popular Sovereignty**

Calvin believed that the restriction of state power by elected bodies was desirable. He did not argue for full democratic legitimacy in general but argued that some nations may use this form of creation of power. Within the church, he proposed that pastors be elected by the people—a principle that exists still today in the reformed church. Imre Takács, a Hungarian constitutional historian, has written that the “Calvinist Constitution,” adopted in 1541 by the citizens of Geneva, served as an example for Rousseau, the philosopher, a later Genevan, in his idea of constitution through referendum.

**The Rule of Law**

Finally, the roots of “the rule-of-law” thinking can also be found in Protestant thought. According to Calvin, “law is a dumb magistrate, the magistrate a living law.” Governors are therefore not free of earthly bonds, laws, and statutes. Calvin was a lawyer himself, and he made laws one of the most important, central categories in the state. Laws bind both the superiors and the people.

This notion of the rule of law was already evident in the writing of a Hungarian Protestant thinker who lived about a hundred years after the age of Luther and Calvin and about a few hundred miles to the east. Pataki Füsüs János, a Calvinist preacher who had studied in Heidelberg, was from Ungvár (today Ukraine); he wrote the book *Mirror of the Kings* in 1622, though it was published four years later in Bártfa (in today’s Slovakia). The author presented the book to Gábor Bethlen, Prince of Transylvania, in whom Füsüs saw the ideal prince. The book was written, in part, to convince the Protestant nobility of Hungary to support the efforts of Bethlen, who came to power with help of the Ottoman Empire. Here, however, I will simply concentrate on a central argument of the book—namely, the theory of limited political power and the point that even rulers are subject to the rule of law.

In his *Mirror* we see the image of the law-seeking, God-fearing king, taking care of his people. According to Füsüs, the primary task of the ruler is the issuance of laws. Without law, human society falls prey to evil, and civil society is destroyed. Law applies to everyone, even the rulers. The godly king “in his power does not look at what he can do but rather warns of those permitted by the law. For not everything he is able to do is allowed for him to do.” This is similar to what the Bible says: “all is free for me but not all is useful” (Corinthians 1, 6:12). He denies the “princeps lege solutus es—the prince free from the law” principle and the absolutist idea that the king operates outside the law. In his eyes, Bethlen is the good prince, who “truly rule[s] the kingdom by the law.”

Füsüs describes the relationship between the king and the law: “There is no greater thing for a king than to give (place) himself under the laws.” It is up to the officers to warn the prince of this obligation. Füsüs acts in this regard with his work. It is a recurring idea of the book that
Calvin believed that the restriction of state power by elected bodies was desirable.

Part II

Jumping forward another two centuries, we come to Kuyper, who was a doctor of Calvinist theology, the founder of a university, a journalist, and a politician. We can call him a true Calvinist public figure. In many ways, Kuyper can be considered a political liberal in the classical sense, a perspective not in conflict with the Bible. On the contrary, it reflects the freedom that a follower of Christ can achieve when he/she is delivered from the captivity of both secular grandeur and religiosity. This freedom is not in conflict with the biblical or secular law; rather, it fulfils it.

The rediscovery of Kuyper is all the more needed as the opinions of many today ignore the existence of an ideal society on earth and focus instead on the afterlife, with some going even so far as equating democracy with Satan’s machinations—positions that are voiced within diverse churches, including the Calvinist Church. Kuyper was pragmatic: he put his theology into practice. As a man of action, he concentrated on the here and now, not merely as a theologian but also as a practical politician whose thoughts are still valid today.

In his 1874 book *Calvinism: The Origin and Safeguard of Our Constitutional Liberties*, Kuyper explains how the Calvinist system yields real constitutional public law. For him, it is evident (what has gotten lost in Central Europe) that Calvinism made democracies such as England, Switzerland, the Netherlands or the United States great. He showed that the foundations of the American constitution were almost literally present in the 1573 Huguenot constitution, including the bicameral legislature or universal suffrage. Quoting Tocqueville and Bancroft, Kuyper argues that the origin of the constitutional development in the United States lies in Calvinism, rather than in the French Revolution.

He combined Calvinist theology with democratic principles brilliantly. All four democratic principles can be derived from his work. Equality of all humans before God is a foundation of popular sovereignty and fundamental freedoms. The role of the state as just one of the necessary spheres of society which needs to be balanced is the argument for separation of powers and rule of law.

In his work entitled “Our Programme,”22 Kuyper outlines a practical political programme and lays the foundation for the first true people’s party in the Netherlands, the Anti-Revolutionary Party, which opposed the ideas of the French Revolution. Here, Kuyper combined theology, political theory, and his concepts of organization in a modern way. His way of thinking is grounded in the Calvinistic principle that religious freedom is only based on responsibility towards God and that the state can only govern individuals if it recognises their social ability to act, their activity, and their organic communities. In “Our Programme,” Kuyper offered an alternative to the secular politics of his age, which still influences Christian politicians all over the world.

His theory of society and the state is based on the theory of sector or sphere sovereignty, which is the concept that each sector or sphere of society has its own distinct competence and responsibilities, and stands equal to other spheres, not above them. Every sector or sphere is governed and coordinated by God. Spheres do not only include the state, society, and the church, but also include the family, science, and the economy.23 Historically evolved variation and diversity are
accepted, as every human creature was created in the likeness of God. Families and business, for instance, are governed by different laws, and not by the same framework. No sphere, including religious organizations, may strive to wield absolute power. The state may not grow tentacles that reach into every sphere of life. To his mind, the state is only one of several trees in a forest that should let the other trees grow and develop. His ideal picture is “a free church in a free state,” thereby rejecting also the idea of a state religion. Occasionally, he refers to the state as a possible threat to our personal freedom. The “little circles of freedom,” in István Bibó’s words, are perceptible in the creed of the university he founded—the Free University of Amsterdam—which was, and remains still today, “free” from both the church and the state.

The circles of freedom are the “societal spheres” in Kuyper’s concept. They are free: their autonomy is controlled by the direct sovereignty of God. The organizing force is neither the ultimate sovereignty of the state nor popular sovereignty, but that of God, whose will is sought and followed by all sectors. He rejects the notion of an all-powerful state that appears and then becomes fully-fledged later in the German theory of state, where God’s place is taken over by the state, where God’s place is taken over by the state that overwhelms everything. Kuyper also called for the creation of institutions, schools, social organizations, and universities that were necessary for the operation and fulfilment of all three broad religious elements within Dutch society—namely the Catholic, Reformed, and secular perspectives. As important aspects of God’s grace are common in his view, the state is not there to protect Christian interests as group interests, but to seek for the common good. Though he was a Calvinist, he had a pluralist approach and propagated the view that different churches may follow Jesus, not just an “official” approach.

He also rejected authoritarianism in the church: in Kuyper’s view, only Calvinism had reached a point where members of the church can disagree with religious leaders because the authority of religious leaders is also under the sovereignty of God, just like that of the believers. In his thinking, however, Kuyper was “Catholic,” in the original, early Christian sense of the word, believing in the unity of Christians, regardless of denomination. Later, this perspective became part of the general program of Christian Democratic parties in several European countries.

In 1898, at the invitation of Princeton Seminary, Kuyper delivered his famous six lectures, one of which, the third one, entitled *Calvinism and Politics*, I am focusing on here. According to Kuyper, the ideal citizen is someone who is on a par not only with his fellow men but also with the state and the political leader because they know that God asserts sovereignty over all of them. His perception of Calvinism is not a purely theological one; it is rather a general social and political one, which rejects revolutions and the street taking control but accepts popular sovereignty and emphasises the role of regulatory bodies limiting political power.

Freedom (and fundamental rights) is a crucial term in his theory, which is based on the concept of a “free church in a free state”—with free citizens, one might add. He states that only Calvinism allows—or, if necessary, obliges—members of the church to engage in debate even with the highest church leaders, if God requires, as happened during reformation. His tolerance in religion was reflected by his commitment to parallel school systems of the Roman Catholic and Calvinist churches, and state, all three enjoying state support. In the long-standing conflict between authority and freedom, he chooses the latter one. For him, freedom is a desire planted in people by God in order to limit chances of tyranny.

He argues for a passive state, which only intervenes if societal spheres conflict with each other or the weak need support. He describes the role of the state as follows: “The State may never become an octopus, which stifles the whole of life. It must occupy its own place, on its own root, among all 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.”

Thus, in Kuyper’s thinking, common grace
and common good go hand in hand. The Protestant conception assumes humans who stand up for their and each other’s rights, and only bend before God—a cornerstone also for modern democracy and constitution.

Part III

To conclude, Calvin Füsüs, as well as Kuyper, has pointed out that Protestantism and Calvinism, as Christian belief systems, are not merely theology or ideology but ways of life that call for a comprehensive political program at the same time. Everything in the world—including citizens, state, and society—is under the rule of God and forms the earthly congregation of Christ, so that the two entities (state and citizen), which are largely in conflict with each other in enlightenment thought, live peacefully and serve each other. In Kuyper’s famous words, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”

Citizens under the sovereignty of God must be able to make independent decisions based on laws, and free people should be responsible for their actions. The Calvinist is—in the words of Jenő Sebestyén, a Hungarian neo-Calvinist theologian—“never satisfied with the spirit of silent, passive piety, but was always able to contemplate both theologically and politically at the same time because he could see the two in a higher unity in the light of God’s sovereignty.”

The Calvinist has no separate private, religious, professional or family life, but a singular (eternal) life, in which every minute and every square inch—as Kuyper said—is under God’s power: one God, one life, one all-encompassing teaching, as the Bible answers all the questions of life, including, but not restricted to, good governance, according to the Protestant doctrine of sola scriptura. For every occupation or activity—whether that of a craftsman, a merchant, or a politician—the Bible offers guidance without explicitly addressing any of these. Ideal, ready-made solutions for government, business, systems, etc., cannot be found in Scripture. The task of the state is to enforce, or at least to give effect to, the general teaching of the Bible, which is based on universal grace. Therefore, the public good sought by the state and what constitutes the public interest extends not only to Christians but to all.

Government, therefore, in the Protestant conception, is God’s servant, not for his own benefit but for the benefit of all kinds of people. All are to obey the government, as long as it does not prevent one from following what God commands; and State power must be limited in order to leave room for freedom—a starting point for separation of powers and rule of law. Kuyper took it all in a practical way and made it a coherent political program, in which we see self-conscious, law-conscious citizens, acting for each other’s well-being. It is a liberal Christianity that does not force its justice on others, since everyone is in God’s hands, whether one knows it or not. Equality is a result not only of a revolutionist theory but of the Creation: “Equality before God.” This Christianity was the foundation for modern democratic principles, like popular sovereignty and fundamental freedoms.

At this point, however, Kuyper’s works are almost completely unknown to the Hungarian reader, and the English translation of his works has been only accessible for a few years. It is to be hoped that researchers of state theory will discover Kuyper in the near future (this conference can be a good starting point). It would be good to read his works in Hungarian by 2020, Kuyper’s Centenary.

I will finish by recalling the revolution of 1956. One of the actors, István Bibó, the greatest 20th-century Hungarian political thinker, was appointed minister of state in the last days of the revolution. When, on 4th of November, the Soviet tanks invaded the capital, he stayed alone...
in the Parliament building. He himself had a Calvinistic connection, as his wife was the daughter of László Ravasz, bishop of the Reformed Church. He said the famous words: “a democrat is never afraid.” With Kuyper we could change it slightly to “a Christian is never afraid” because if God is with us, who can be against us? A follower of Jesus raises his head in front of his fellow men, both in politics or religion, and kneels only before God. Christians, anywhere on Earth, are—or need to be—free, self-conscious people placed only under the sovereignty of God and the laws proclaiming it.

Endnotes

1. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the conference “No square inch – Abraham Kuyper, Politics and Religion in Modern Society,” Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church Budapest, 9th November 2018.


3. Unfortunately, however, Kuyper is still largely unknown in Hungary and most of Central and Eastern Europe, as his works are only read and taught as part of theological courses within Reformed seminaries—something to which he likely would have objected in that Calvinism is not simply theological perspective but a way of life. So up till now, only the Stone Lectures are translated into Hungarian.


16. Pataki Füsüs, 121.

17. Pataki Füsüs, 3.


19. Pataki Füsüs, 83.

20. Pataki Füsüs, 134.


24. Kuyper, Lectures on Calvinism, Third Lecture, 86.


29. Kuyper, Lectures on Calvinism, Third Lecture, 83.


31. Quote from Birkás, Antal: Reformácio, államhatalom, politika [Reformation, state power, politics]; Luther Kiadó (Budapest, 2011), 241.

32. Kuyper, Lectures on Calvinism, First Lecture, 22.