

# Calvin and Neo-Calvinism on Public Theology

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## **Abstract**

In 1974, Martin Marty first introduced the term *public theology*, and it has since gained popularity. However, the reality of public theology has long been a part of the church's witness and should continue to be one of the church's essential tasks. John Calvin's view of public theology has impacted modern politics, both on the democratic movement and the development of Western law and human rights. Not a few have accused him of inhibiting freedom and democratic ideals. Here, I will discuss Calvin's political thought and also identify a few themes that were later developed by his followers, especially the neo-Calvinist movement initiated by Abraham Kuyper, and which provide foundational concepts for building a pluralistic and tolerant democratic society.

## **Keywords**

*Public Theology, neo-Calvinism, John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, Church-state relationship, sphere sovereignty*

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## Introduction

In 1974, when distinguishing his theological ideas from Robert Bellah's understanding of civil religion, Martin Marty, a Protestant church historian from Chicago Divinity School, coined the terms *public theologian* and *public theology*.<sup>1</sup> Since then public theology has been a popular topic, becoming one of the most important in Christian theology and ethics.<sup>2</sup> However, while it is discussed openly in all religious traditions,<sup>3</sup> it is primarily associated with Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of public theology is, as John Bolt has defined it, "to provide a theological framework within which Christian citizens can conscientiously fashion their political vocation and interpret, evaluate, and transform the civic communities of which they are members."<sup>5</sup> It attempts to think about various public issues from a theological perspective. Bolt's definition suggests three kinds of approaches that public theology could take. The first approach is apologetic in nature. As Max Stackhouse observes, by allowing Christians to encounter different faiths in public life and engage with them, the apologetic approach of public theology tries to maintain a friendly relationship with non-Christians who may have different and even opposing worldviews.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, as public theology in Bolt's definition aims to transform and change society, it also has a confessional nature in that it focuses on the promotion of distinctive Christian values and commitments in its attempts

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<sup>1</sup> The term *public theologian* first appeared in Martin E. Marty, "Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion," in *American Civil Religion*, ed. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 139–57, whereas the term *public theology* was first used in Martin E. Marty, "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience," *Journal of Religion* 54.4 (1974): 332–59.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Sebastian Kim and Katie Day, eds., *A Companion to Public Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Richard C. Martin, "Public Aspects of Theology in Medieval Islam: The Role of *Kalam* in Conflict Definition and Resolution," *Journal for Islamic Studies* 13 (1993): 77–100; Alan Mittleman, ed., *Religion as a Public Good: Jews and Other Americans on Religion in the Public Square* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Robert W. McElroy, *The Search for an American Public Theology: The Contribution of John Courtney Murray* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 185, n. 12.

<sup>5</sup> John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper's American Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 224.

<sup>6</sup> See Max Stackhouse, *Public Theology and Political Economy: Christian Stewardship in Modern Society* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), viii–xiv, 17–35. A number of authors have taken the apologetic approach in spite of having differing views on certain issues. See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); Robert Benne, *Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); and Glenn Tinder, *The Political Meaning of Christianity: An Interpretation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

to change the social-political structure of society. Ronald Thiemann is one among those who defended this confessional approach.<sup>7</sup> The third approach underscores Bolt's emphasis on the importance of political ideas for public theology, especially when it has to deal with public elements such as religious pluralism, academics, politics, and economics.<sup>8</sup>

Within this framework, this article will discuss John Calvin's idea of public theology, which has had a tremendous impact on many areas of life. In line with Bolt, we will address Calvin's political thought and argue that his public theology is both apologetic and confessional. However, scholars have also noted that while Calvin's political ideas have become a catalyst for modern political thought<sup>9</sup> in the way they influence modern theories of law and government<sup>10</sup> and develop modern democracy and human rights,<sup>11</sup> they have also been accused of inhibiting freedom and democratic ideals.<sup>12</sup> This tension has subsequently given rise to the image of "two Calvins." His followers later identified other tensions within Calvin's political ideas and developed certain themes related to those tensions. One such theme is the political thought of the neo-Calvinist movement—a movement chiefly associated with the great Dutch theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper corrected and further developed Calvin's political ideas of public life. In this article, I shall also argue that the adoption of a

<sup>7</sup> See Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991). A number of confessional theologians, although maintaining different views on some aspects of the approach, share certain core similarities with it. See William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989); George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984); Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); and John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Max L. Stackhouse, introduction to *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*, ed. Max L. Stackhouse (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1999), xxvii–xxviii.

<sup>9</sup> See Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 2, *The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Ralph C. Hancock, *Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> See John T. McNeill, "Calvin and Civil Government," in *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 260–74; John Witte Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Douglas F. Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World: The Influence of Calvin on Five Governments from the 16th Through 18th Centuries* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> See John T. McNeill, "The Democratic Element in Calvin's Thought," *Church History* 18.3 (September 1949): 153–71; Robert M. Kingdon, "Calvinism and Democracy: Some Political Implications of Debates on French Reformed Church Government, 1562–1572," *American Historical Review* 69 (1964): 393–401.

<sup>12</sup> See Roland Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty* (London: Lutterworth, 1953).

neo-Calvinist thinking of public theology will provide a significant contribution to the establishment of a pluralistic and tolerant society.

## I. Calvin's Views

### 1. Calvin's Concept of Public Theology

As Calvin's idea of public theology is rooted in the sovereignty of God, it claims that only the Triune God is sovereign over all of life. Calvin teaches that each person is by nature *homo religioso*—incurably religious. He therefore calls the human heart a “factory of idols” (Rom. 1:25),<sup>13</sup> indicating that a religiously neutral ground simply does not exist. Calvin insists that Christians, in recognition of this, must enter the various arenas of public life and transform secular society. In his 1951 classic *Christ and Culture*, Richard Niebuhr argues that the Christ as “the Transformer of Culture” position is most clearly presented in the work of Calvin.<sup>14</sup> Taking religious reform seriously, Calvin is deeply concerned by the need to reform the secular realm. “We must not only grieve for the offences committed by unbelievers,” Calvin points out, “but also recognize that we remain unworthy to look upon heaven until there is harmony and unanimity in religion, till God is purely worshipped by all, and all the world is reformed.”<sup>15</sup> He further adds that only “by practicing justice towards each other” can Christians “prove that their service of God is sincere.”<sup>16</sup>

For Christians to transform society, they must first of all engage with other religious values. It seems that an apologetic approach to public theology fits well with Calvin, as Stackhouse argues:

That which we as Christians believe we have to offer the world for its salvation is not esoteric, privileged, irrational, or inaccessible. It is something that we believe to be both comprehensible and indispensable for all, something that we can reasonably discuss with Hindus and Buddhists, Jews and Muslims, Humanists and Marxists. Second, such a theology will give guidance to the structures and policies of public life. It is ethical in nature. The truth for which we argue must imply a viable element of justice, and its adequacy can be tested on that basis.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 2006), 1.11.8.

<sup>14</sup> See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 190–229.

<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *Sermon No.30 on Deuteronomy*, 238, quoted in William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 192.

<sup>16</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 12:7.

<sup>17</sup> Stackhouse, *Public Theology*, xi.

Calvin observes that the transformation of society reveals the Christian's necessary responsibility. This transformation necessitates a confessional approach to public theology, which Thiemann proposes in his definition of public theology as "faith seeking to understand the relation between Christian convictions and the broader social and cultural contexts within which the Christian community lives."<sup>18</sup>

Any proper analysis of Calvin's political thought unsurprisingly leads to the conclusion that the correct relationship between church and state became a major concern for him. The issue of church-state relationship was, as David Little has put it, "as old as the Christian church itself and in an important sense had been at the heart of Christian cogitation, in its diverse forms, from the beginning of Christianity."<sup>19</sup> His foundational ideas of the church-state relationship are found in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and in the biblical commentaries.

## 2. Church-State Relationship and Liberty

Calvin's view on church and state cannot be separated from his doctrine of the two kingdoms. While Calvin took up Martin Luther's two-kingdoms approach in many important ways, he developed it in a different direction.<sup>20</sup> He did not agree with the way Luther defined the relationship between church and state. Following Luther, he believed that God established two kingdoms with a distinct purpose for each.

There is a twofold government in man: one aspect is spiritual, whereby the conscience is instructed in piety and in reverencing God; the second is political, whereby man is educated for the duties of humanity and citizenship that must be maintained among men. These are usually called the "spiritual" and the "temporal" jurisdiction ... by which is meant that the former sort of government pertains to the life of the soul, while the latter has to do with the concerns of the present life .... For the former resides in the inner mind, while the latter regulates only outward behavior. The one we may call the spiritual kingdom, the other, the political kingdom.<sup>21</sup>

The distinction between the two kingdoms must be constantly kept in mind. Calvin was concerned about those who "unwisely mingle these two, which have a completely different nature."<sup>22</sup> How distinct they are is evident

<sup>18</sup> Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> David Little, "Reformed Faith and Religious Liberty," *Church and Society* 76.5 (May–June 1986): 6.

<sup>20</sup> Harro Höpfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 44.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 3.19.15.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.20.1.

from the fact that when people think about one kingdom, they “must call away and turn aside the mind from thinking about the other.”<sup>23</sup>

What does Calvin’s view of the church-state relationship look like? Emidio Campi, a distinguished Reformation church historian, has described Calvin’s view of the church-state relationship as follows:

In the *Institutes*, book IV, chapter 20, Calvin clearly elucidates his views [on the relationship of the Church and the civil magistrates], which were in marked contrast with a number of other positions. As is well known, he firmly rejected the papal hierarchy of the late Middle Ages. He was equally opposed to the Erastian subordination of the Church to the political authority, be it in Lutheran or Zwinglian fashion. Although he refused, like the Anabaptists, any confusion between the spiritual and the temporal orders, he did not hold with them that Christians ought to remain apart from all magisterial offices. Magistrates are a gift of God for the benefit of the human race and therefore to despise them is to despise the providence which set them in place.<sup>24</sup>

Campi rightly notes that based on his two-kingdoms theory, Calvin rejects the doctrine of papal supremacy advocated by the Roman church, which subordinates the state’s authority to the church’s control. It is understood that the pope, who claims to be Christ’s deputy, possesses supreme jurisdiction in all ecclesiastical matters since “Christ’s kingdom is not of this world.” But by claiming supreme power over civil power, Calvin argues, the pope “rules barbarously and tyrannically.”<sup>25</sup> He further indicates that by confusing its ministry of Christ’s spiritual government and the magisterial political claims, the Roman church disclosed its obsession with “secular power” and “lust for dominion.”<sup>26</sup> Clerics were more interested in exercising political power than in fulfilling their spiritual functions as ministers of Christ. Consequently, electing a bishop, “they choose a lawyer who knows how to plead in a court rather than how to preach in a church.”<sup>27</sup> The Roman church, according to Calvin, is corrupt since it neglects its fundamental ministry of the Word.<sup>28</sup> The problem was “not simply the politicization of ecclesiastical authority,” as Matthew Tuininga has put it, “but the exercise of magisterial power over religion, as if Christ has placed his authority at the discretion of the church.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 3.19.15.

<sup>24</sup> Emidio Campi, *Shifting Patterns of Reformed Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 65–66.

<sup>25</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 60:10.

<sup>26</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 4.11.14.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 4.5.1.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 4.2.10.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew J. Tuininga, *Calvin’s Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church:*

Campi is also correct in noting that Calvin's two kingdoms doctrine led him to refuse *Caesaropapism*—"a system whereby supreme authority over the church is exercised by a secular ruler, so even doctrine is subject to state control."<sup>30</sup> As noted above, civil government is responsible for establishing peace and public justice, both of which remain outward, temporal, and limited to this life. Otherwise, "the civil and earthly government cannot be distinguished from the spiritual kingdom of Christ."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, by maintaining the authority and independence of the church, Calvin argued against *Erastianism*—a form of *Caesaropapism*—that occurred in England in 1534 when King Henry VIII, by ending the pope's influence, declared himself the Supreme Head of the Church of England.<sup>32</sup> Calvin compared Henry to the apostate Israelite King Jehu, who enthusiastically obeyed the call of a prophet to overthrow the dynasty of Ahab but continued to hold on to the idolatrous worship of King Jeroboam. Calvin concludes that "the reformation under Jehu was like that under Henry," in which Henry "pretended great zeal for a time: he afterwards raged cruelly against all the godly and doubled (*duplicavit*—duplicated) the tyranny of the Roman Pontiff."<sup>33</sup>

By the rejection of both papal supremacy and *Caesaropapism*, a "community of freedom" between church and state could be attained.<sup>34</sup> Stackhouse rightly notes that human freedom, which is "a gift of God" and "the mark of being genuinely human,"<sup>35</sup> is a significant key theme for the apologetic approach of public theology. This approach requires an engagement of different values and religious backgrounds in the public sphere. But how can the different religious beliefs engage properly with one another without each being freed from the bondage of religious and political powers?

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*Christ's Two Kingdoms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 188.

<sup>30</sup> J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 173. The authority exercised by the Byzantine (East Roman) Emperors over the Eastern Church, especially in the centuries immediately preceding the Schism of 1054, is the best way to illustrate *Caesaropapism*. F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 264.

<sup>31</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 12:10.

<sup>32</sup> Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, vol. 2, *Reformation to the Present, A.D. 1500–A.D. 1975* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 801–2.

<sup>33</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Hosea* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 1:3–4.

<sup>34</sup> See David Hollenbach, "Afterword: A Community of Freedom," in *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*, ed. R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 323–43.

<sup>35</sup> Stackhouse, *Public Theology*, 29–30.

The idea of freedom is essential for Calvin's public theology. Calvin views freedom as coming from God and thus "an inestimable boon"<sup>36</sup>—something that is worth "more than half of life."<sup>37</sup> Calvin distinguishes spiritual freedom from political freedom. While God has ordained spiritual freedom to balance the spiritual law of the church, God has bestowed political freedom to balance the law of the state.<sup>38</sup> Calvin would not tolerate any abuse of either spiritual or political freedom by any government, whether in the form of papal supremacy or of Caesaropapism. When governments abuse God-given freedom, they no longer hold the office of authority described in Romans 13 but are mere "brigands" and "criminals."<sup>39</sup> Such governments, having risen against God, must be put down through "lesser magistrates."<sup>40</sup>

While arguing that church and state should be kept distinct, Calvin also stresses that they "are not at variance."<sup>41</sup> He observes in Romans 13 how Paul describes government as "an ordinance of God" and princes as "ministers of God." Civil government is not only a "holy and lawful" vocation but also "the most sacred and by far the most honorable of all callings in the whole life of mortal men."<sup>42</sup> While Calvin does not include civil government as part of Christ's spiritual kingdom, he considers it to be under the lordship of Christ.<sup>43</sup> Therefore the two kingdoms are not what the Anabaptists view as "antithetical" and irreconcilable.<sup>44</sup> Calvin considers the Anabaptists' rejection of Christians' participation in civil government as overthrowing the political order. It indicates their failure to appreciate civil government as a gift of God's providence essential to human life since it establishes "civil justice and outward morality."<sup>45</sup>

As both kingdoms are under Christ and must serve his purposes, Calvin advocates for "their mutual interaction."<sup>46</sup> Whereas Little employs the term "disassociate and interconnect" to describe the relation between church and state in Calvin's thought,<sup>47</sup> Stanford Reid summarizes Calvin's political

<sup>36</sup> *Calvin Opera* 29:544, quoted in Höpfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin*, 158.

<sup>37</sup> *Calvin Opera* 24:627, quoted in McNeill, "The Democratic Element in Calvin's Thought," 166.

<sup>38</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 4.20.1.

<sup>39</sup> Witte, *The Reformation of Rights*, 50–51.

<sup>40</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 4.20.31.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.20.2.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.20.4.

<sup>43</sup> See Gordon J. Keddie, "Calvin on Civil Government," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 32 (1981): 23–35.

<sup>44</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 4.20.2.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.20.1.

<sup>46</sup> John T. McNeill, "John Calvin on Civil Government," in *Calvinism and the Political Order*, ed. George L. Hunt (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), 41.

<sup>47</sup> Little, "Reformed Faith," 9.

thought as “that of mutual independence, but also of mutual helpfulness and support.”<sup>48</sup> Campi also underscores Calvin’s view on the church-state relationship as “not the separation of the spiritual and temporal powers but rather their mutual aid and reciprocal collaboration, each being free in its own sphere.”<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, church and state—although separate from each other—are responsible to each other. With regard to the church’s responsibility to the state, Calvin argues that Christians have to take their faith and distinctive values directly into public life “as ambassadors and stewards of the treasure of salvation, of the covenant of God ... of the secrets of God.”<sup>50</sup> Such a role of religion in public life, according to Thiemann, is a key characteristic of the confessional approach of public theology. For him, “questions of conviction, value, and faith” should become a part of “public discourse.”<sup>51</sup> John Witte points out Calvin’s emphasis that in so doing, Christians “not only allow God’s glory and image to shine” in society but also “induce unbelievers in society to seek God’s grace.”<sup>52</sup>

In sum, Calvin’s view on church-state relationship not only frees the church from the bondage of social-political powers such as the state but also encourages it to carry out its role in the public domain. Note that in addition to “liberties” or “freedoms” (*libertates, libertés*), Calvin also speaks about “rights” (*iura, droits*). Witte notes Calvin’s occasional use of such general phrases as “the common rights of mankind” (*iura commune hominum*), the “natural rights” (*iura naturali*) of persons, the “rights of a common nature” (*communis naturae iura*), and “the equal rights and liberties” (*pari iura et libertates*) of all.<sup>53</sup>

Calvin’s idea of rights has been developed by his successor Theodore Beza and later by others such as Johannes Althusius, John Milton, and in Puritan New England. Before the Enlightenment, Calvinists argued for natural rights, especially natural religious rights such as freedom of belief, practice, and conscience.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> W. Stanford Reid, “Calvin and the Political Order,” in *John Calvin: Contemporary Prophet*, ed. Jacob T. Hoogstra (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1959), 252.

<sup>49</sup> Emidio Campi, “Calvin’s Understanding of the Church and Its Relevance for the Ecumenical Movement,” *Kirchenbund*, [https://www.kirchenbund.ch/en/topics/calvin-s-understanding-church-and-its-relevance-ecumenical-movement#fussnote\\_39](https://www.kirchenbund.ch/en/topics/calvin-s-understanding-church-and-its-relevance-ecumenical-movement#fussnote_39).

<sup>50</sup> Witte, *The Reformation of Rights*, 61.

<sup>51</sup> Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 40.

<sup>52</sup> Witte, *The Reformation of Rights*, 61.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>54</sup> See *ibid.*

Therefore, numerous scholars have noted Calvin's ties to the development of liberty and human rights. Charles Borgeaud, for example, has considered Calvin to be "the first stronghold of liberty in modern times."<sup>55</sup> Robert Knudsen describes Calvin as "the patron of modern human rights. In his thought he anticipated the modern republican form of government. ... Calvin stood against the abuses of power in his time and wrestled with the problem of the right to revolt."<sup>56</sup> "Every competent historian," as Kuyper put it, "will without exception confirm the words of [the American historian George] Bancroft: 'The fanatic for Calvinism was a fanatic for liberty, for in the moral warfare for freedom, his creed was a part of his army, and his most faithful ally in the battle.'"<sup>57</sup>

### 3. *Constantinian Influence and Intolerance*

With regard to the state's responsibility to the church, Calvin argues that government is the guardian of both tables of the Decalogue.<sup>58</sup> Along with maintaining the peace and public decency of the Second Table, civil government is ordained to promote "true religion" of the First Table. As far as the First Table is concerned, one primary task of the government is to prevent "idolatry, sacrilege against God's name, blasphemies against his truth, and other public offenses against religion."<sup>59</sup> As Campi put it,

The civil authority is endowed with God's authority and acts as his representative. Calvin emphasizes that its primary functions are not solely preventative and deterrent. In fulfilling their divinely ordained task in the civil kingdom, the magistrates are called to work in the service of the spiritual kingdom.<sup>60</sup>

For this reason, magistrates have among their chief tasks "to cherish and protect the outward worship of God" and "to defend sound doctrine of piety and the position of the church."<sup>61</sup> Hence "a public manifestation of religion may exist among Christians."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> As quoted in John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 196.

<sup>56</sup> Robert D. Knudsen, "Calvinism as a Cultural Force," in *John Calvin: His Influence in the Modern World*, ed. W. Stanford Reid (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 13.

<sup>57</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 78, quoting George Bancroft, *History of the United States of America*, 15th ed. (New York, 1853), 1:319.

<sup>58</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 4.20.9.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.20.3.

<sup>60</sup> Campi, *Shifting Patterns*, 62.

<sup>61</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 4.20.2.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.20.3.

It is therefore unfair to charge Calvin with Constantinian thinking. “The *Constantinian* model,” according to John Hiemstra, “sees the rule of God occur through *Christian* political authorities who are revelatory of God’s will and thereby have the right to govern over and above the church and society and impose Christian beliefs.”<sup>63</sup> Even though the magistrates’ civil jurisdiction is over religious and moral matters they are not, according to Calvin, “to make laws according to their own decision concerning religion and the worship of God.” Their duty does not include “rightly establishing religion.”<sup>64</sup> Witte observes that this view of Calvin is “[in] contrast to both Lutherans and Anglicans, who at that time vested in the magistrate the power to promulgate all manner of civil laws respecting religious worship, liturgies, prayers, and other cultic activities. Calvin countenanced no such legal religious establishment.”<sup>65</sup>

Nevertheless, by allowing magistrates to promulgate laws against idolatry, a Constantinian influence, or “a key negative Constantinian element,”<sup>66</sup> exists in Calvin’s thought. The religious coercion of government, according to Hiemstra, will inevitably “raise the spectre of oppression, persecution and intolerance of minority and dissenting faiths.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, considering the unique context of time and place, Calvin’s support for the magistrates’ execution of Servetus, which has been called “one of the most famous controversies of modern times about religious freedom,” is not surprising.<sup>68</sup>

Calvin’s position reappears in the Belgic Confession (1561)—a doctrinal standard of the Reformed faith. Drafted by Guido de Brès, a student of Calvin, the initial text of the Confession was influenced by the Gallic Confession (1559), which was largely written by Calvin.<sup>69</sup> Article 36 duplicates Calvin’s Constantinian influence:

And [the magistrates’] office is, not only to have regard unto, and watch for the welfare of the civil state; but also that *they protect the sacred ministry; and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship; that the kingdom of anti-Christ may be thus destroyed and the kingdom of Christ promoted. They must therefore countenance*

<sup>63</sup> John L. Hiemstra, “A Calvinist Case for Tolerant Public Pluralism: The Religious Sources of Abraham Kuyper’s Public Philosophy,” *Religious Studies and Theology* 34.1 (2015): 61.

<sup>64</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 4.20.3.

<sup>65</sup> Witte, *The Reformation of Rights*, 65.

<sup>66</sup> Hiemstra, “A Calvinist Case,” 62.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>68</sup> Josef Lecler, *Toleration and the Reformation* (London, 1960), 1:325 as quoted in Witte, *The Reformation of Rights*, 65.

<sup>69</sup> D. G. Hart, “Implausible: Calvinism and American Politics,” in *John Calvin’s American Legacy*, ed. Thomas J. Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 77.

*the preaching of the Word of the gospel everywhere, that God may be honored and worshipped by everyone, as he commands in his Word.*<sup>70</sup>

While captive in a Dutch/Belgian prison in 1561, de Brès drafted this Confession with the purpose, among other things, of showing the Catholic Spanish King Philip II, who was persecuting Reformed Christians, that “he and the Reformed churches in fact did adhere to true Christian faith.” Hiemstra explains further,

They were neither rebellious, nor law breakers, nor heretics, so the King had no grounds to persecute them. Ironically, de Brès does not question whether political authorities ought to have a duty to coercively advance “true” religion or, conversely, to oppress “false” religions .... De Brès assumed the correctness of this political task, as did all Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican and fellow Calvinist leaders of his time.<sup>71</sup>

For this reason, numerous scholars criticize Calvin and describe him as intolerant and inhibiting freedom. Ernst Troeltsch pictures him as “notoriously rigid” and his views as “as undemocratic and authoritarian as possible.”<sup>72</sup> Roland Bainton calls Calvin “the arch-inquisitor of Protestantism” and “dictator of Geneva.”<sup>73</sup> “If Calvin ever wrote anything in favor of religious liberty,” writes Bainton, “it was a typographical error.”<sup>74</sup>

Hence the concept of “two Calvins.” In his portrayal of Calvin, William Bouwsma concludes that there were really “two Calvins, coexisting uncomfortably within the same historical personage.”<sup>75</sup> One Calvin was “a philosopher, a rationalist and a schoolman in the high Scholastic tradition,” “a man of fixed principles, and a conservative.” This “philosophical Calvin” favored a “static orthodoxy” and “craved desperately for intelligibility, order, certainty. Distrusting freedom, he struggled to control both himself and the world.” The other Calvin was “a rhetorician and humanist,” who tolerated individual liberty and was “flexible.” This was a Calvin who “was inclined to celebrate the paradoxes and mystery at the heart of existence.”<sup>76</sup> This two-sidedness of Calvin’s persona has given birth to different traditions within Calvinism, where each could appeal directly and with warrant to Calvin himself.

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<sup>70</sup> Henry Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1929), 266 (emphasis added).

<sup>71</sup> Hiemstra, “A Calvinist Case,” 63.

<sup>72</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Churches* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1949), 2:628.

<sup>73</sup> Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty*, 53, quoted in Witte, *The Reformation of Rights*, 40.

<sup>74</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Concerning Heretics ... An Anonymous Work Attributed to Sebastian Castello* (New York: Octagon Books, 1935), 74, quoted in Witte, *The Reformation of Rights*, 40.

<sup>75</sup> Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, 230.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 230–31.

Next, I will discuss the political ideas of neo-Calvinism that corrected and developed Calvin's concept of public theology and see how they establish a pluralistic and tolerant society.

## II. *The Neo-Calvinist Tradition*

Kuyper and his followers agreed to call themselves neo-Calvinists since they viewed themselves as developing historic Calvinism to counter the surrounding culture.<sup>77</sup> One of the most significant contributions of neo-Calvinism to public theology is its vision of pluralism. In the Netherlands, since the late nineteenth century, the neo-Calvinist tradition has argued for a pluralistic and tolerant society,<sup>78</sup> and during the past four decades Kuyper's concept of pluralism has been acknowledged as a distinctive Reformed contribution to culture and government. Rooted in Calvin's political thought, neo-Calvinism's idea of public theology claims that only the Triune God is sovereign over all of life.<sup>79</sup> This means that all of life is religious. Kuyper formulated this insight in his famous adage that "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'"<sup>80</sup> After examining Kuyper's theological and political ideas, Vincent Bacote concludes that his public theology is both apologetic and confessional.<sup>81</sup>

### 1. *Sphere Sovereignty*

Based on God's sovereignty, neo-Calvinism holds that God has created the world with various structures and institutions that operate within different spheres of social life. Each of these spheres—the family, the church, the school, the civil government, the marketplace—has its own God-given task, and God commands human beings to serve as officeholders in these various spheres of life. This pluralism, which Kuyper called *sphere sovereignty*, teaches that not a single sphere can properly usurp the power or the

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<sup>77</sup> Albert Wolters, "Dutch Neo-Calvinism: Worldview, Philosophy and Rationality," in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, ed. Hendrik Hart, Johan van der Hoeven, and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), 117.

<sup>78</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 131.

<sup>79</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 79.

<sup>80</sup> James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 461.

<sup>81</sup> See Vincent E. Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

functions of another.<sup>82</sup> Sphere sovereignty is normative, since each sphere is an “ordinance of God” and a part of the original created order.<sup>83</sup>

Regarding the church-state relationship, sphere sovereignty proposes “a community of freedom” between church and state.<sup>84</sup> Kuyper called it “a free Church in a free State.”<sup>85</sup> As noted above, freedom is a key theme for public theology’s apologetic approach. Due to human freedom, sin entered the world, hence freedom, which is “a gift of God” and “the mark of being genuinely human,” becomes an absolute necessity. Stackhouse explains: “A God who leaves no place for error, contrition, and free choosing of what is right and good is not a God who can touch the core of human existence, just as no social arrangement that destroys freedom in a totally regulated environment can sustain human loyalty.”<sup>86</sup>

Based on this principle of freedom, Kuyper refused both papal supremacy (which he called ecclesiasticism) and Caesaropapism, which subordinate church and state one to another. For Kuyper, the church-controlled culture of ecclesiasticism, which promotes the idea of a theocratic state, was simply unthinkable. Theocratic rule by the church denies the concept of sphere sovereignty, since it allows the church to usurp the realm of the state. Moreover, since the doctrine of God’s sovereignty claims that only the Triune God is sovereign over all of life, then the church—by also claiming sovereignty over all spheres of life—has pretended to be God. Wherever this theocratic rule of the church was established, it always ended, as Kuyper claimed, “in tyranny and the corruption of the people.”<sup>87</sup>

Due to his commitment to sphere sovereignty, Kuyper also rejected the Caesaropapism, which promotes a “state church” by allowing the church to be controlled by the state. Despite the government’s dignity, Kuyper maintained that “the sovereignty, by the grace of God, of the government is here set aside and limited, for God’s sake, by another sovereignty, which is equally divine in origin.”<sup>88</sup> “The sovereignty of the State and the sovereignty of the Church” should “exist side by side” and “mutually limit each other.”<sup>89</sup>

<sup>82</sup> See Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Abraham Kuyper*, ed. Bratt, 461–90.

<sup>83</sup> See Abraham Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2015), 29–41.

<sup>84</sup> See David Hollenbach, “Afterword: A Community of Freedom,” in *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*, ed. R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 323–43.

<sup>85</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 99.

<sup>86</sup> Stackhouse, *Public Theology*, 29–30.

<sup>87</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 35.

<sup>88</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 96.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

When these two different natures are mixed, it causes “a terrible confusion of the two spheres of life.”<sup>90</sup>

Kuyper opposed Article 36 of the Belgic Confession, which states that one primary task of the magistrate is to protect and promote true worship, destroy the kingdom of antichrist, and promote the kingdom of Christ. Being aware that this came from Calvin, Kuyper argued that a Constantinian influence existed in Calvin’s approach and that it was a mistake for Christians to accept this position.<sup>91</sup> At the Synod of Utrecht in 1905, Kuyper persuaded his denomination, the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (Reformed Churches in the Netherlands) to remove these words and amend the confession.<sup>92</sup> The revised article states that instead of coercively promoting true religion, the state “must countenance the preaching of the Word of the gospel everywhere, that God may be honored and worshipped by everyone, as He commanded in his Word.”<sup>93</sup>

## 2. Confessional Pluralism

Neo-Calvinism also promotes the idea of confessional pluralism, which Gordon Spykman defines as “the right of the various religious groups that make up a society to develop their own patterns of involvement in public life through their own associations—school, political parties, labor unions, churches, and so on—to promote their views.”<sup>94</sup> Unlike sphere sovereignty, confessional pluralism, which presupposes a plurality of religions, is not normative because it has resulted from sin and is not what God desires. In the parable of the wheat and weeds (Matt 13:24–31, 36–43) Christ teaches that he is the only one who has the right to exercise the ultimate judgment of the wicked. Christ has never promised the state that he would give it the guidance of the Holy Spirit to enable it to distinguish the true church from the false.<sup>95</sup> This is to say that neither Christians nor other religious communities should have special privileges in society.

Based on confessional pluralism, ecclesiasticism cannot be justified since it creates “a religion of the church” with special privileges in society. Nothing is wrong with the intention of the ecclesiastical authority to give a “Christian direction” to various spheres of life, as the doctrine of God’s sovereignty

<sup>90</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 35.

<sup>91</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 100.

<sup>92</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 64.

<sup>93</sup> Henry Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1929), 271.

<sup>94</sup> Gordon Spykman, “The Principled Pluralist Position,” in *God and Politics: Four Views on the Reformation of Civil Government*, ed. Gary Scott Smith (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1989), 79.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 85–86.

indicates that God’s rule must be acknowledged over all spheres of human activity. Its mistake, as Richard Mouw has put it, “was investing the church with the power to mediate that rule.”<sup>96</sup> The task of professing God’s sovereignty over all of life must be done by “collective entities within each of the spheres.” Kuyper’s founding of a Reformed academic institution is a good practical example. He named it the *Vrije Universiteit*—“Free University”—because he wanted it to be free from church and state control. The Christian identity of the university, which was based on “Reformed principles” for academic life, would be taken care of by “a Christian association” independent of both church and state.<sup>97</sup>

By being subordinated to the power of the state, the state church loses its transcendental character. The kingdom of Christ is subordinated to the temporal power of the state. The danger of Caesaropapism, as Kuyper put it, was that it leads “to the spiritual death of the church and thus to the loss of spiritual knowledge of God’s Word as it pertains also to government.”<sup>98</sup> Kuyper regretted the fact that the Lutheran territories in Germany advocated the spirit of Caesaropapism, which in Protestant circles was later called Erastianism.<sup>99</sup>

The two features foundational to neo-Calvinist public theology—sphere sovereignty and confessional pluralism—are indispensable to a genuinely pluralistic society that would provide equal justice for all in family life, politics, education, and religion.

### 3. A Religious State

Not only did Kuyper challenge all illegitimate forms of civil government, he also offered a legitimate and normative form:

And that therefore neither the Caesaropapy of the Czar of Russia; nor the subjection of the State to the Church taught by Rome; nor the “Cuius regio eius religio [whose realm, his religion]” of the Lutheran jurists; nor the irreligious neutral standpoint of the French revolution; but that only the system of a free Church, in a free State, may be honored from a Calvinistic standpoint.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Richard J. Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 40.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>98</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 35.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*; cf. Peter A. Lillback, “The Relationship of Church and State,” in *Reformation Theology: A Systematic Summary*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 686–87.

<sup>100</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 106.

Three things should be noted from Kuyper's emphasis. First, his Calvinistic idea of the state honors the doctrine of God's sovereignty. Since civil government is ordained by God and has divinely appointed governing tasks, it should submit to God's transcendent norms. In this regard, civil government, according to Kuyper, should consider itself "a servant of God" (Rom 13:4), in the sense that "willingly or unwillingly, it is and remains dependent on God."<sup>101</sup>

Second, by being a servant of God, the government goes beyond mere dependence on him. The government "must acknowledge its calling to serve God,"<sup>102</sup> and its chief task is to promote outward and temporal justice and morality in society (Rom 13:1–5). Kuyper rejected the spirit of papal supremacy advocated by Rome, which subordinates government and its earthly kingdom tasks under the spiritual control of the pope.

Third, when undertaking its tasks as a servant of God, the government "stands outside the domain of revealed religion," but it possesses the "natural knowledge of God" and not "the supernatural kind, at least not directly."<sup>103</sup> In other words, religion is inseparable from politics. Kuyper emphasized that there should be "no separation between religion and state but only between state and church."<sup>104</sup> He therefore objected to the secular state that resulted from the French Revolution, which promoted an irreligious neutral standpoint.

In short, neo-Calvinism, according to James Smith, is an alternative to the worldviews of ecclesiasticism and secularism. While the former creates "a theocratic state," the latter, according to Kuyper, promotes "a secular state."<sup>105</sup> Smith argues that as a third way, neo-Calvinism "has often been fighting on two fronts":

On the one hand, it has functioned as an internal critique of Christian hegemony over public life and the political sphere in particular .... This is [neo-Calvinism's] anti-Constantinian, antiestablishment, (supposedly) anti-Christendom move .... On the other hand, [neo-Calvinism] also pushes back on the myth of any feigned secular "neutrality" in the political sphere .... It argued that democratic, pluralistic societies need to make room for religious voices and religious communities in the wider web of civil society as a matter of societal health.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 49.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 65–66.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 34–35, 58, 61.

<sup>106</sup> Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 134–35.

Thus, Kuyper viewed the state neither as theocratic nor secular but as acknowledging God's sovereignty. Kuyper calls his idea "a Christian nation," meaning "a nation not without God."<sup>107</sup> However, his *Christian nation* could be misleading and confused with *Christian state*, which he rejected.<sup>108</sup> I therefore prefer to call Kuyper's state a *religious state*.

#### 4. Civil Public Square

Although the spheres are independent, they are called to work together to promote a "wholesome community life."<sup>109</sup> Spykman calls collaboration among the various social spheres "a sphere universality."<sup>110</sup> In terms of the religion-state relationship, in line with Calvin, Kuyper argued that although church and state are separate, they each have a responsibility toward the other.<sup>111</sup> The issue is then of how the state should fulfill its responsibility toward the church and the church toward the state.

With regard to the state's responsibility toward the church, it should accept "the presence of conflicting faith-communities within its bounds" and not discriminate against people because of their religious convictions. The state should safeguard religious freedom for all of its citizens and guarantee their equal rights.<sup>112</sup> In this regard, James Skillen explains,

The just treatment of every citizen requires of government the fair and equitable protection of a variety of religions, not because every religion is presumed to be equally correct or true on theological or ecclesiastical grounds but because government's competence to establish public justice coupled with its incompetence to define and enforce religious orthodoxy leads to a *civic-moral* conclusion that there should be fair and equitable confessional pluralism.<sup>113</sup>

However, in Kuyper's view, when different spheres clash, then the state has "to compel mutual regard for the boundary-lines of each; [and] to defend individuals and the weak ones, in those [spheres], against the abuse of power of the rest."<sup>114</sup>

As regards the church's responsibility toward the state, Kuyper challenged secularism and its idea of a secular state, which removes religion from

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<sup>107</sup> Kuyper, *Our Program*, 49.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>109</sup> Spykman, "The Principled Pluralist Position," 80.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," 467–68.

<sup>112</sup> Spykman, "The Principled Pluralist Position," 85–86.

<sup>113</sup> James W. Skillen, *Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civic Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 84.

<sup>114</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 97.

the public sphere. Neo-Calvinism contends that as a created order, civil government derives its power and authority from God and should therefore subject itself to God's claim of sovereignty. For this reason, it rejects "neutrality" in the political sphere. It is impossible for the political sphere to be free from any religious element, hence Roy Clouser's terminology, "the myth of religious neutrality."<sup>115</sup> For Kuyper, an "irreligious neutral standpoint" as proposed by the French Revolution is simply unrealistic.<sup>116</sup>

Moreover, by relegating religious voices to the private domain, the secular state not only usurps the domain of religion but also restricts the rights of religion and opposes sphere sovereignty. Kuyper, according to Hiemstra, rejected this exclusively secular public realm as "discriminatory, unjust, and intolerant."<sup>117</sup> Therefore Kuyper's neo-Calvinism, with its deep commitment to God's sovereignty, is, as Ryan McIlhenny put it, "the best weapon against the secularism of the modern age."<sup>118</sup>

Realizing the importance of Kuyper's influence on contemporary society, I would like to conclude by quoting James Bratt's observation in his book, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*: "Perhaps Kuyper's greatest significance for our own religiously and culturally fractured world is the way he proposed for religious believers to bring the full weight of their convictions into public life while fully respecting the rights of others in a pluralistic society under a constitutional government."<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> See Roy Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

<sup>116</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 106.

<sup>117</sup> Hiemstra, "A Calvinist Case," 60.

<sup>118</sup> Ryan C. McIlhenny, "Introduction: In Defense of Neo-Calvinism," in *Kingdoms Apart: Engaging the Two Kingdoms Perspective*, ed. Ryan C. McIlhenny (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012), xviii.

<sup>119</sup> James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), xiii.