

Kuyper and Reformed Public Theology: Family, Freedom, and Fortune

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Abstract

This article introduces and illustrates the public theology developed by Dutch theologian, philosopher, and statesman Abraham Kuyper at the turn of the twentieth century. Much like Pope Leo XIII transformed modern Catholicism with a new social teaching movement grounded in neo-Thomist thought, Kuyper transformed modern Protestantism with a new public theology grounded in the Reformed tradition going back to John Calvin. Combining close biblical and catechetical exegesis with sweeping theological and political doctrines of the created order, social pluralism, covenant doctrine, and sphere sovereignty, Kuyper defended traditional teachings on the family, offered strikingly modern theories of ordered liberty and orderly pluralism, and stuck to a principled but pragmatic program on property, labor, and economics.

Keywords

Abraham Kuyper, Calvinism, creation order, orderly pluralism, family, freedom, education, labor, property, social welfare

Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) was one of the great polymaths in the history of the Netherlands and in the Calvinist tradition. He was a formidable theologian and philosopher, journalist and educator, churchman and statesman of extraordinary accomplishment. He published some 223 scholarly works¹ and thousands of devotionals,² sermons, speeches, lectures, letters, op-eds, briefing papers, and media quotes. He served for nearly half a century as editor-in-chief of both the Dutch daily *Standaard* and the weekly *Heraut*. He founded the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880 and taught there intermittently for two decades. Throughout much of his career, Kuyper was also a leader of the Protestant Anti-Revolutionary Party in the Netherlands and served as a Member of Parliament beginning in 1874, then as Minister of Justice, and finally as Prime Minister of the Netherlands from 1901 to 1905.

English readers have long had access to several of Kuyper's basic texts in translation and to several studies of his life and work.³ But the expert translation and emerging publication of a new twelve-volume series of Kuyper's *Collected Works of Public Theology*, masterminded by Jordan Ballor and Melvin Flikkema at the Acton Institute, give English readers a much more nuanced portrait of Kuyper's wide-ranging intellect and sterling accomplishments in multiple fields.⁴ Here readers can find an excellent cross-section of his work over a long career—multivolume theological tomes, expansive political platforms and policy statements, learned sermons and speeches, pithy op-eds, and popular articles.

These new publications serve not only to solidify Kuyper's place high on the honor roll of great Dutch Calvinists, they also help secure his standing as a towering Christian public intellectual of the later nineteenth century,

We express our gratitude to Jordan Ballor of the Acton Institute for giving us access to and permission to quote from manuscripts of Abraham Kuyper's twelve-volume *Collected Works of Public Theology* now in production. This essay is adapted in part from John Witte Jr.'s introduction to Abraham Kuyper, *On Charity and Justice*, in Melvin Flikkema and Jordan Ballor, eds., *Collected Works in Public Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, forthcoming).

¹ See James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), xi. See the invaluable 756-page guide: Tjitze Kuipers, *Abraham Kuyper: An Annotated Bibliography, 1857–2010*, ed. Barend Meijer (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

² George Harinck, foreword to Kuipers, *Abraham Kuyper*, xiii (referencing ca. 2200 devotionals).

³ See the twenty-eight-volume collection of works by and on Kuyper edited by James D. Bratt et al., *Abraham Kuyper Comprehensive Studies Collection*, <https://lexhampress.com/product/129570/abraham-kuyper-comprehensive-studies-collection>.

⁴ James D. Bratt et al., ed., *Abraham Kuyper Comprehensive Studies Collection* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2015–).



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whose teachings offer an enduring and edifying witness to modern churches, states, and societies alike. Much as his contemporary Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) led a retrieval and reconstruction of the teachings of Thomas Aquinas and the Thomist tradition to reform modern Catholicism, so Kuyper helped revive and renew the best teachings of John Calvin and the Reformed tradition to reform modern Protestantism. Leo used natural law and subsidiarity theory to build a new “social teachings” movement for modern Catholic engagement with the world. Kuyper used theories of “creation order,” “common grace,” and “sphere sovereignty” to build a comparable Calvinist “public theology” movement for the Protestant world. Leo understood the need for the “development of doctrine” to keep Catholicism as a vital and valuable alternative to secular forms of liberalism and socialism in his day. Kuyper fought against these same political movements using an ethic of *semper reformanda*—a constant openness to reform traditional teachings in light of new insights from Scripture and the Spirit, and new challenges posed by the growing religious pluralism and rampant secularization of his day.⁵

In this brief article, we offer three samples of Kuyper’s expansive public theology—his teachings on family, freedom, and fortune. With some of these teachings, Kuyper largely stuck to the Calvinist tradition, convinced of the cogency of his forebears’ views and content to make only modest reforms. With others, he was transformative, urging reforms of thought and practice that still remain relevant today within and well beyond the Reformed world.

I. *Kuyper on Family*

Kuyper’s discussion of the family—“the Christian household,” as he put it—illustrates his more traditional side. The family was one of the first institutions that sixteenth-century Protestants had reformed root and branch.⁶ Calvin in particular replaced medieval Catholic teachings that marriage is a sacrament under the canon law authority of the church with the idea that

⁵ See, e.g., Jordan Ballor, ed., *Makers of Modern Christian Social Thought: Leo XIII and Abraham Kuyper on the Social Question* (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute, 2016); Symposium, “A Century of Christian Social Teaching: The Legacy of Leo XIII and Abraham Kuyper,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 5 (2002): 1–304; David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 276–315; Russell Hittinger, “Pope Leo XIII,” in *Modern Christian Teachings on Law, Politics, and Human Nature*, ed. John Witte Jr. and Frank S. Alexander (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 39–73; Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, “Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920),” in *ibid.*, 288–327.

⁶ See John Witte Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 113–286.

marriage is a covenant under the spiritual guidance of the church and the legal governance of the Christian state. The Christian family was created by God as a “two in one flesh” union of “male and female” (Gen 1:27; 2:24). Couples were to court properly, and marriages were to be formed with mutual consent of the couple, parental consent on both sides, two or more witnesses, public state registration, and consecration and celebration in a church wedding. Both husbands and wives were called to respect the other’s sexual bodies and needs and to abstain from sex only temporarily and by mutual consent (1 Cor 7:2–5). Spouses had to love, respect, and sacrifice for each other, although wives were “subject in everything to their husbands”—as Eve was made subject to Adam after the fall into sin and the church was called to be “subject to Christ” (Gen 3:16; Eph 5:21–33). God “hates divorce” (Mal 2:16) but allows it in cases of serious fault, like adultery or desertion (Matt 19:9; 1 Cor 7:15)—much as Yahweh himself threatened to “divorce” his beloved metaphorical bride Israel when she “played the harlot” in violation of the covenant (Ezek 16; Jer 3:7–8; Isa 50:1).⁷

The marital couple was called to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28). Both fathers and mothers were to nurture, educate, and discipline their children in loving preparation for their own vocations, marriages, and lives as adults. Adult children were to “honor and obey” their parents (Exod 20:12) and to care for them in their old age in exchange for presumptive inheritance. Church, state, school, and community alike were to support the family but without encroaching on its inner workings or liberties or subjecting it to the “covetous” privations of neighbors. Calvin and his protégé Theodore Beza had built an intricate theology, law, and practice of the covenant family for sixteenth-century Geneva, and this early example was echoed and elaborated in numerous Calvinist communities thereafter in Continental Europe, Great Britain, North America, the Caribbean, Africa, and colonial India and Indonesia.⁸

This Calvinist family heritage was still part of Dutch Reformed theology and culture in Kuyper’s early years, and he quoted and cited these biblical texts and traditions with alacrity.⁹ But Napoleon’s legal reforms after the French Revolution catalyzed strong new efforts to reduce the church’s

⁷ See sources and discussion in John Witte Jr. and Robert M. Kingdon, *Sex, Marriage and Family in John Calvin’s Geneva*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005, 2021).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Abraham Kuyper, “Christ’s Kingship and the Family,” in Abraham Kuyper, *Pro Rege: Living under Christ’s Kingship*, 2 vols., trans. Albert Gootjes, ed. John Kok with Nelson D. Kloosterman (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2017), 299–462. See further texts and analysis in James D. Bratt, “Abraham Kuyper,” in *Christianity and Family Law: An Introduction*, ed. John Witte Jr. and Gary S. Hauk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 291–306.

involvement in marriage; to foster greater sexual liberty and expression; to enhance women's suffrage, education, and public access; to protect both spouses' rights to marital property, easier divorce, child custody after marriage, and more.¹⁰ Kuyper had rather little sympathy with most such family reforms, and he used the pulpit, press, and political platform to push hard against them. For he regarded the traditional family, and the concomitant division of public and private lives for men and women respectively, to be an essential cornerstone of ordered liberty and a properly organized society.¹¹

The traditional family, Kuyper believed, was a fundamental model and incubator of the moral virtues of love and sacrifice, caring and sharing, discipline and vocation, authority and liberty. It was also a prototype for a properly structured and well-functioning state. Ideally, the relationship between husband and wife taught citizens to trust and cooperate with each other and with a legitimate government. Spouses who believed, accommodated, and defended each other modeled the actions of governments that trusted their subjects, citizens who accommodated their neighbors, and employers and employees who guarded each other's reputations and honors as well as their lives and limbs. The relationship between parents and children taught citizens to respect and restrain authority and liberty more generally. Children who revered their loving father as an authority who modeled uprightness would learn to respect the lawful state as a legitimate authority that established justice. Children who saw their mothers as advocates who corrected their father's faults and unfairness would learn to stand up for their constitutional rights and those of others when they were threatened by state authorities. The ongoing relationships between siblings taught citizens to resort to negotiation and litigation instead of violence and recrimination in working out their differences and maintaining their voluntary associations. Siblings who reasonably reported on each other's wrongdoings so that parents could correct, punish, and reconcile them to each other would grow into citizens who could resort as needed to lawsuits for courts to make fair judgments and order remedies and restitution. The relationship between masters and servants taught citizens the true meaning of "being of

¹⁰ For a contemporaneous account, see L. J. van Apeldoorn, *Geschiedenis van het nederlandsche huwelijksrecht voor de invoering van de fransche wetsgeving* (Amsterdam: Uitgeversmaatschappij, 1925).

¹¹ See, e.g., Abraham Kuyper, *Antirevolutionair óók in us Huisgezin* (Amsterdam: Kruyt, 1880); Abraham Kuyper, *De Eeerepositie der Vrouw* (Kampen: Kok, 1914), with other texts and analysis in Mary Stewart van Leeuwen, "Abraham Kuyper and the Cult of True Womanhood: An Analysis of *De Eeerepositie der Vrouw*," *Calvin Theological Journal* 31 (1996): 97–124.

service and being served.” Faithful maids, butlers, apprentices, and others who humbly served their masters and mistresses could show civil officials how to serve the state, pastors how to serve their churches, and citizens how to serve one another.¹²

This was Kuyper’s ideal family ethic and structure and the reason he regarded the family as the cornerstone of the polis and political order. He believed that the values of the French Revolution were destroying these organic family relationships, and he thus summoned the Dutch to oppose these revolutionary reforms of domestic life and law. Against those who sought to elevate the woman’s place in the family, Kuyper argued that husbands were to rule the household, not because of their merit or strength but because of God’s divine ordinances for men’s and women’s earthly roles. Against those who believed parents had to earn the right to command their children’s obedience, Kuyper argued that the Ten Commandments and the New Testament household codes alike gave parents binding authority over their children, who were called to “honor and obey them ... so that their days may be long in the land” (Exod 20:12). Against those who sought to resolve family conflicts by sending unruly children to boarding school or filing for divorce for light causes, Kuyper argued that families were to be faithful to their marital and parental commitments, knowing that what “God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mark 10:9). Against those who reduced master-servant relationships to mere service contracts with stipulated duties, rights, and rewards, Kuyper argued that masters and servants were to “love each other” as they loved themselves—aware that, while they occupied different “stations” in life, they had equal “vocations” before God and were equally redeemed by the same blood of Christ and governed by the same Word of God.¹³

Many readers today will find Kuyper’s traditional family values and household ecology to be quaint, obsolete, even offensive. But his teaching echoed the domestic ethics and theology of the family taught already by Calvin and other sixteenth-century Reformers. And these traditional teachings recurred for centuries thereafter in Calvinist and other Protestant lands and were set out in hundreds of catechisms, household manuals, and books of etiquette and deportment. These volumes were the spiritual “Dr. Spocks” of their day that copiously spelled out the reciprocal rights and

¹² See Abraham Kuyper, “The Family, Society, and the State,” in *On Charity and Justice*, ed. Matthew J. Tuininga (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, forthcoming; hereafter, *OCJ*), part 3–4. Because *OCJ* is forthcoming, we do not cite page numbers for *OCJ* references but instead cite section or part numbers when possible.

¹³ *Ibid.*, part 11–14.

duties of husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and servants within a properly structured and governed Christian household.¹⁴

II. *Kuyper on Freedom*

Kuyper offered a robust and revisionist account of democracy and liberty, laying some of the foundations for modern forms of Christian liberalism and Christian democracy in the Netherlands and beyond. Kuyper rejected the “secular narrative”—popular in his day and pervasive in our own—that democracy and human rights were modern products of Enlightenment liberalism, individualism, and contractarianism and dependent on the new secular trinity of *liberté, égalité, et fraternité* born of the French Revolution. In line with some other historians of his day,¹⁵ Kuyper argued that it was Calvinist theology, not Enlightenment liberalism, that laid many of the foundations for Western forms of constitutional democracy, limited government, enumerated rights, and rule of law.¹⁶ Calvinism, Kuyper wrote, was not only a spiritual movement but also “a political movement which has guaranteed the liberty of nations in constitutional statesmanship; first in Holland, then in England [and Scotland], and since the close of the last century in the United States.” It was Calvinists who first “lifted up freedom of conscience” and insisted that “the magistrate has nothing to do with a person’s innermost beliefs ... or with a person’s domestic life or friendships.” It was Calvinists who first “reached the conclusions that follow from this liberty of conscience, for the liberty of speech, and the liberty of worship ... and the free expression of thought ... and ideas.” It was Calvinists who “first developed the principle of separation of church and state” and the constitutional recognition that “the Church derives its authority directly from God, not mediately through the state or through the community.” It was Calvinists who first effectively “protest[ed] against State-omnicompetence; against the horrible conception that no right exists above and beyond existing [positive] laws; and against the pride of absolutism [which is] death to our civil liberties.” It was Calvinists who first pressed classical theories of

¹⁴ See examples and analysis in John Witte Jr., *Church, State, and Family: Reconciling Traditional Teachings and Modern Liberties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 106–28.

¹⁵ See, e.g., George Jellinek, *Die Erklärung der Menschen- und Bürgerrechte: Ein Beitrag zur modernen Verfassungsgeschichte* (Leipzig, 1895); with distillation of later scholarship in Josef Bohatec, *England und die Geschichte der Menschen- und Bürgerrecht*, 3rd ed., ed. Otto Weber (Graz: Böhlau, 1956).

¹⁶ The next six paragraphs are adapted in part and updated from John Witte Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 321–34.

mixed government into constitutional principles of federalism and republicanism, separation of powers, and checks and balances between them. And it was Calvinists who led the first democratic revolutions against tyrannical authorities in France, the Netherlands, Scotland, and England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹⁷

Not only had Calvinists defined, defended, and died for many features of democratic constitutionalism well before the Enlightenment broke out, Kuyper continued, Calvinists also grounded their political teachings in sturdier theological propositions than the thinner derivative postulates of later Enlightenment liberalism. Instead of postulating a mythical “state of nature,” as the liberal *philosophes* did, Calvinists grounded their teachings in the orders of creation and the commandments of God. Instead of assuming that natural human life was lawlessly “brutish, nasty and short,” they emphasized the natural restraints of God’s law written on all hearts and God’s common grace which “shines in all that’s fair.”¹⁸ Instead of seeing natural rights as pathways to a self-interested pursuit of life, liberty, and property of the sovereign individual, they saw rights as opportunities to discharge divine duties set out in the Decalogue and other moral laws. Instead of seeing constitutions as social and government contracts between individuals designed to protect individual rights, they treated constitutions as divinely modeled covenants between the rulers, people, and God designed to protect human and associational rights, to break up and bracket political power, and to encourage and celebrate godly values. Instead of seeing free speech, free exercise, or free assembly as individual rights limited only by the rights of others and the boundaries of treason, Calvinists saw them as constitutional expressions of the biblical teaching that all persons are called by Christ to be prophets, priests, and kings in the world, with duties to speak, serve, and rule with others in the creation and protection of a godly republic. Drawing on these and many other such dialectics, Kuyper hammered out a striking new history of Christianity, democracy, and human rights, and a sturdy new platform of Christian liberalism.¹⁹

¹⁷ Abraham Kuyper, *Dictaten Dogmatiek*, 2nd ed. (Kampen: Kok, n.d.), 51:387–88, 415; Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, repr. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 105–9; Abraham Kuyper, “Calvinism: Source and Stronghold of Our Constitutional Liberties,” in *Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. Bratt, 279–322.

¹⁸ Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That’s Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); see also Richard J. Mouw, introduction to *Common Grace: God’s Gifts for a Fallen World*, by Abraham Kuyper, 2 vols., ed. Jordan Ballor and Stephen J. Grabill, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman and E. M. van der Maas (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016), xviii–xxx.

¹⁹ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 105–9; Kuyper, “Calvinism: Source and Stronghold,” 279–322; Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 19–54, 92–101, 155–207, 297–323; Abraham Kuyper,

Kuyper not only retrieved traditional Calvinist teachings on freedom, he also reformed them for his day. Despite Calvinism's support for freedom of conscience and liberty of speech, Calvin's Geneva and many later Reformed communities on both sides of the Atlantic instituted firm censorship and licensing rules and silenced or ostracized outspoken dissenters. Kuyper rejected such encroachments and advocated vigorous freedom of speech and press. He drew inspiration from seventeenth-century English poet and philosopher John Milton, an early Calvinist champion of freedom of speech and press whom Kuyper lauded.²⁰ Milton emphasized that God's universal calling to be prophets, priests, and kings gave everyone the right and duty to speak, write, and debate in church and state, family and society, and school and business at once. This was the real driving force of a *semper reformanda* ethic, Milton argued. This was the best way to pursue the truth of God and Scripture, reason and nature, all to be discovered by free and robust education and inquiry, experiment and debate, publication and conversation. Only when freed from the tyranny of prelates and monarchs, of ignorance and error, of censors and licensors, Milton believed, could divine, natural, and human truth finally be discovered and developed. Only when bad speech was countered by good speech in a free and open exchange would the public good ultimately be enhanced.²¹

Milton proved to be a lonely and neglected prophet in his day, and his ideas would take another two centuries to penetrate deeply into Western constitutionalism. But Kuyper reflected some of these same Miltonian sentiments. As a journalist, he saw the free press as a vital "estate," even an independent "social sphere," in a well-ordered and accountable democratic society. The press was a necessary check on the excesses and abuses of all authorities, even an "apostle of peace" for a divided and tumultuous world, he wrote. Furthermore, as an educator, Kuyper prized literacy and learning not only as a means for every person to read Scripture and train for their Christian vocation, as Protestants had long taught, but also as a great leveler and elevator of human society. Proper education for all gave full voice to all, especially the "little people" (*kleine luiden*) too often shut out and shut down from public deliberation. Kuyper was not into American-style free

"The Ordinances of God," in *Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society*, ed. James W. Skillen and Rockne M. McCarthy (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 242–57. See detailed sources and discussion in Witte, *The Reformation of Rights*, passim.

²⁰ See, e.g., Kuyper, "Calvinism: Source and Stronghold," 292–97.

²¹ See Witte, *Reformation of Rights*, 259–71 and expanded in John Witte Jr., "Prophets, Priests, and Kings of Liberty: John Milton and the Reformation of Rights and Liberties in England," *Emory Law Journal* 57 (2008): 1527–604.

speech absolutism, nor was he an unqualified advocate of “an open marketplace of ideas” or popular sovereignty above all else. He called for civility, not “rudeness,” in all speech and writing and constructive engagement, not crass materialist or prurient excess. He also had little sympathy for hate speech, insurrectionary rhetoric, or expressions of “class egoism.” While sometimes betraying prejudices in his early writing and speeches, Kuyper at his best called for respectful discussion of and public engagement with Jews, Muslims, and other “peoples of God.”²²

Looking abroad, Kuyper defended other democratic institutions and liberties. He often lauded the United States of his day as a model of the kind of system he advocated for the Netherlands and beyond.²³ “America lacks no single liberty for which in Europe we struggle,” Kuyper wrote. “In America there is absolute liberty of conscience,” and “no citizen of the State may be compelled to remain in a church which his conscience forces him to leave.” In America, there is “separation of church and state,” which provides a “better guarantee [of] ... ecclesiastical liberty than anything that now prevails in Europe.” The state does not establish or prescribe religious texts, beliefs, or practices. It does not interfere in matters of church polity, property, or personnel. Nor does it “subsidize the churches” or collect their tithes. “In America, Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Baptists, and Methodists are equally respected,” each part of the “multiform manifestation of the Church of Christ on earth.”²⁴ Also respected are peaceable Jews, Muslims, and other “people of faith.” Indeed, Kuyper argued, “all things within the forum of conscience and on domestic and private life must be

²² See *OCf*, chaps. 2, 6, and 8 and further sources and discussion in James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 320–35.

²³ See analysis of Kuyper’s deep engagement with America in John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper’s American Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); Luis E. Lugo, ed., *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper’s Legacy for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

²⁴ Kuyper, *Dictaten Dogmatiek*, 5/1:387–88, 444–45; Abraham Kuyper, *Varia Americana* (Amsterdam and Pretoria: Hōveker & Wormser, 1897) 18–22, 52–54, 136–62; Kuyper, “Calvinism: Source and Stronghold,” 279–322; Abraham Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto*, trans. and ed. Harry Van Dyke (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2015), 351–63; Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopaedie der heilige Godgeleerdheid* (Kampen: Kok, 1909), 3:614–24; Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 106–9. Kuyper set out his church ideal briefly in Abraham Kuyper, *Our Worship*, trans. and ed. Harry Boonstra et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), and more fully in Abraham Kuyper, *On the Church*, ed. John Halsey Wood Jr. and Andrew M. McGinnis (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016), esp. 377–437; for Kuyper’s views of “State and Church” with discussion, see John Halsey Wood, *Going Dutch in the Modern Age: Abraham Kuyper’s Struggle for a Free Church in the Nineteenth-Century Netherlands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 142–75.

free—for the atheist as much as for the fully devout ... indeed, for all sects.”²⁵

Kuyper also praised the American principle of associational liberty and social pluralism, seeing it as exemplary of his signature doctrine of “sphere sovereignty.” The long American tradition of voluntarism and fraternity, Kuyper wrote, has led to ample legal protection not only of churches and religious organizations but also of a plurality of other “social spheres”—families, schools, unions, guilds, clubs, convents, corporations, and more. Each of these social spheres is amply protected by the provisions of state criminal law. Each is amply facilitated by the procedures of state private law. But none of these social spheres is ultimately dependent upon the state for its existence or for its competence. The formation and maintenance of each social sphere depend upon the voluntary association and activity of private parties. The competence and authority of each social sphere, furthermore, depends upon “its innate norms,” its “God-given liberty”—its “inherent sphere sovereignty.”²⁶

“Sphere sovereignty” does not render a social sphere “a law unto itself”—just as personal sovereignty does not make each person a law unto himself or herself. Instead, sphere sovereignty entails that each of these social spheres has the liberty to operate independently of the state in accordance with its own God-given norms and in deference to the liberty interests of other social spheres and of all individuals. “There exists side-by-side with the personal sovereignty [of the individual conscience], the sovereignty of the [social] sphere.” And the “rights and liberties of social life” exercised by and within these social spheres, come “from the same source from which the high authority of government flows—even the absolute sovereignty of God. From this one source, in God, sovereignty in the individual sphere, in the family, and in every social circle, is just as directly derived as the supremacy of state authority.” A plurality of spheres of personal, ecclesiastical, social, and political liberty thus stand alongside each other—each ultimately created by and accountable to God. A plurality of offices and activities within each sphere of liberty also stand alongside each other—each designed to discharge some portion of God’s special calling for that sphere. This understanding of associational liberty and social pluralism, which Kuyper found so well expressed in late-nineteenth-century America,

²⁵ Kuyper, *Dictaten Dogmatiek*, 5/1:415. See, e.g., Abraham Kuyper, *Liberalisten en Joden* (Amsterdam: Wormser, 1878) and Abraham Kuyper, *On Islam*, trans. Jan van Vliet, ed. James D. Bratt and Douglas A. Howard (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2017).

²⁶ See *OCD*, chap. 4; Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 90–99; Kuyper, *Varia Americana*, 38–49; Kuyper, *Dictaten Dogmatiek*, 5/1:73–186; Kuyper, *Encyclopaedie*, 3:322–30.

was an essential plank of his own political platform in the Netherlands.²⁷ And Kuyper's teaching on "sphere sovereignty" has proved to be one of his most enduring and pervasive contributions to contemporary discussion of social and legal pluralism, both in Europe and North America.²⁸

III. *Kuyper on Fortune*

As part and product of his theories of divine sovereignty, sphere sovereignty, and creation order, Kuyper also provided many cogent and compelling reflections on "fortune"—an umbrella term for questions of property, stewardship, work, labor, business practices, poverty, and pensions. Kuyper's teachings on these themes both echoed and reformed the Calvinist tradition.

Like Calvin, Kuyper started from the conviction that God alone, as the creator of the cosmos *ex nihilo*, is the absolute owner of everything.²⁹ Humans receive everything they have as a divine gift, and God commands them to steward, not squander their possessions. Humans are to "dress and keep" the garden as God's lords of creation (Gen 2:15; Ps 8:5–8), to offer to God the first fruits of their labor (Deut 26:2), and to use their property to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). Like Calvin, Kuyper commended work and condemned idleness, championing the Protestant teaching that God calls all persons to a "vocation" that best suits their natural abilities and gifts. But "if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat" (2 Thess 3:10). Like Calvin, Kuyper drew on the Bible to condemn rampant usury, gambling, speculation, vanity, and "worship of mammon." And like Calvin, Kuyper reminded his fellow churchgoers that Christ loved and lived with the poor; Christ himself took on "the form of a servant" (Phil 2:6–7), became poor to make man rich (2 Cor 8:9), found "nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58),

²⁷ See Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 95–96; Kuyper, *Our Program*, 16–22.

²⁸ See illustrative texts in Skillen and McCarthy, eds., *Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society* and a recent illustration in Kent A. Van Til, "Abraham Kuyper and Michael Walzer: The Justice of the Spheres," *Calvin Theological Journal* 40 (2005): 267–89. For two recent legal adaptations of Kuyperian sphere sovereignty theory, see Johan D. van der Vyver, *Leuven Lectures on Religious Institutions, Religious Communities and Rights* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004); Paul Horwitz, *First Amendment Institutions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

²⁹ See Abraham Kuyper, "You Shall Not Steal: Commentary on Lord's Day 42 of the Heidelberg Catechism," in *On Business and Economics*, ed. Jordan Ballor (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, forthcoming [hereafter, *OBE*], sec. 2. Because *OBE* is forthcoming, we do not cite page numbers for *OBE* references but instead cite section or part numbers when possible. For context, see André Biéler, *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought*, ed. Edward Dommen, trans. James Greig (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, World Council of Churches, 2006); Eric Kerridge, *Usury, Interest, and the Reformation* (London: Routledge, 2017).

proclaimed good news to the poor (Matt 11:5; Luke 7:22), fed the hungry with bread and fish (Matt 14:14–21), and chose lowly fishermen to be his disciples (Matt 4:18–22). All Christians were to serve the poor, needy, orphans, and sojourners in their midst, for “as much as you do it to the least of these you do it to me,” Jesus had said (Matt 25:45). And the church itself was to maintain the diaconate to collect and distribute alms to the “deserving poor”—those who, despite their best efforts, still needed help.³⁰ All this was standard biblical and homiletic lore that Kuyper rehearsed repeatedly.

However, the gusts and gales of Dutch industrialization were posing profound new socioeconomic changes and challenges to the Netherlands and much of the West. Now that employers had access to newfound steam power, electricity, and machinery, many enterprises no longer needed so much manual labor or were growing too large to heed local labor concerns. With open trade, population growth, and foreign workers intensifying competition, Dutch workers were finding it harder to get and keep their jobs. The old systems of guilds that had long guarded local craftsmen’s interests were giving way to more *laissez-faire* business practices that left many workers with lower wages, longer working hours, and harder working conditions. Many workers were forced to sign easily terminable contracts and later lost their jobs or began to slide into poverty. The Industrial Revolution, Kuyper wrote, stripped workers of a “sense of security” in life. In response, workers in Kuyper’s day were picketing and striking, boycotting goods, sabotaging factories, and joining trade unions that endorsed violence. Kuyper labeled the new challenges of industrialization, labor, unemployment, and poverty as “*the social question*” that needed the urgent attention of all spheres of life, including notably the state.³¹

Kuyper took on this “social question” repeatedly in sermons and speeches, pamphlets and policy platforms. He started with the premise that laborers have rights that need to be honored. These rights are grounded in the creation order and described more fully in Scripture. All human beings, Kuyper wrote, have a right (and duty) to work, because they are made in the image of a God who always worked. All workers have a right to a living

³⁰ For Kuyper’s view, see in *OBE*, “You Shall Not Steal,” sec. 3–5; “Meditations: Do Not Work for the Food That Perishes (John 6:27);” “The Social Question and the Christian Religion,” part 2; “Draft Pension Scheme for Wage Earners.” Also see in *OCJ*, “Christ and the Needy.” For Calvin’s view, see Biéler, *Calvin’s Economic and Social Thought*, 128, 135–36, 278–82, 282–86, 288–95, 301–2, 309–13, 316–21, 356–62, 406–16.

³¹ See in *OBE*, “Manual Labor,” part 4; “The Social Question (1917),” sec. 21–34; “Social Organizations under Our Own Banner.” See also his earlier reflections in Abraham Kuyper, *Eenige Kameradviezen* (Amsterdam: Wormser, 1890), esp. 139–203 (“Sociale Quaestie”), speeches on child labor (139–82), and rights of workers (191–97).

wage, so they can discharge their God-given natural duties to care for their children who, in turn, must care for them when they become elderly. The order of nature also makes clear that workers have a right to some form of pension, Kuyper argued, particularly when they lack natural kin networks. Employers who pay too little to provide their workers with “sustenance from cradle to grave” conflict with God’s ordinances set out in Scriptural teachings in Luke 10:7, James 5:4, Deuteronomy 25:4, and Leviticus 19:13. Workers also have a God-given right to rest and honor the Sabbath in accordance with God’s commandment in the Decalogue, “so that their days may be long in the land which the Lord has given them” (Exod 20:8–12). Having that regular Sabbath day rest allows workers and their families to care for their bodies and souls, to fulfill their divine callings to worship, and to honor their parental and marital duties. Finally, given their ample toil and suffering, Kuyper argued that workers have a right to organize themselves, to “lodge ... complaint[s] against a social order that deprive[s]” them of what God has ordained they are to have.³²

A growing number of socialists in the Netherlands and well beyond had sought to answer “the social question” by calling for the abolition of property in favor of communal ownership. Kuyper strongly rejected this view and argued that God had established not only labor rights but also property rights, especially rights to the fruits of one’s labor. Already at creation, Kuyper argued, God had created humans with “an awareness of the distinction between ... mine and thine.” These created natural rights of property were confirmed in the commandments “thou shalt not steal” (Exod 20:5) and “thou shalt not covet,” which set out the reciprocal natural duty to respect the property rights of another.³³

Against both socialists who sought to dismantle property rights and market structures and capitalists who downplayed market problems and impoverished workers, Kuyper outlined new roles for church and state in confronting “the social question.” In “normal” situations, Kuyper wrote, the church was to assume responsibility for assisting the poor with their spiritual and material needs. Those churches that focused exclusively on spiritual needs ignored the reality that Jesus held promises “for the present life” (1 Tim 4:8). Those that focused exclusively on material needs neglected that Jesus was far more than a social reformer. Thus, the church was not

³² See in *OBE*, “Meditations: Do Not Work for the Food That Perishes (John 6:27)”; “You Shall Not Steal,” sec. 5; “Draft Pension Scheme for Wage Earners”; “The Social Question and the Christian Religion,” part 4.

³³ See in *OBE*, “You Shall Not Steal,” sec. 1–2.

only to share the gospel but also to implement a diaconate funding system wherein alms were collected from all and discreetly donated to those in need. Miserly charity was insulting, and ad hoc philanthropy was inadequate to meet the biblical commands to love and care for our neighbors.³⁴

Kuyper recognized, however, that the Industrial Revolution had put the Netherlands in an “abnormal” situation that required state intervention as well. Perfect equality of work, wages, and possessions was neither possible nor desirable. But the state had to provide at least a “para-equality,” Kuyper argued, so that all people could meet their basic needs of “shelter, bed, clothing, and the daily morsel.” Ideally, workers would save enough for their own pensions even while meeting their basic needs. But even prudent workers with families often had barely enough to live on, let alone save. Given current conditions, the state thus had to provide temporary pension funding and mandate participation in an insurance scheme run by employers and employees. God was the absolute owner of all creation, Kuyper repeated, but the state was to act as God’s appointed “master of all goods,” judiciously distributing property to meet the minimum needs of all its subjects, facilitating a welfare and pension system that provided sustenance “from cradle to grave” and resolving property disputes when they arose.³⁵

The doctrine of sphere sovereignty, however, put limits on the state’s power even in this emergency context. The state was to help workers secure their labor rights and minimum property needs, but it had to respect the sovereignty of the separate sphere of labor and capital, employer, and employee. Thus, though workers had rights to a living wage, a Sabbath, and a pension, Kuyper wrote, the state, could *not* directly raise wages, shorten work weeks, or stipulate universal terms for all employer-employee contracts. For the state to intervene so directly in a domain that was “sovereign in its own sphere and governed by its own laws” would eventually “leave every sphere of society at the mercy of the magistrate.”³⁶

Instead, Kuyper proposed, the state was to create a legal framework for laborers and employers to organize themselves and negotiate their interests.³⁷ Specifically, this meant that for every industry, the state could require workers and employers to join an industrial organization, with separate bodies of employees and employers. Each of these bodies in turn, was to

³⁴ See in *OBE*, “The Social Question and the Christian Religion,” parts 2 and 4; “Draft Pension Scheme for Wage Earners”; “The Workers’ Issue and the Church.”

³⁵ See in *OCJ*, “Christ and the Needy,” part 7; *OBE*, “Draft Pension Scheme for Wage Earners”; “You Shall Not Steal,” sec. 4.

³⁶ *OBE*, “Manual Labor,” part 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, part 4.

elect representatives onto a “higher body”—a mixed board of employers and employees—that jointly made decisions for firms within the industry:

This higher body can then determine whatever needs regulation, such as the apprenticeship system, technical training, working hours (differentiated by age, region, and type of industry); wage levels (according to skill, trade and age); unemployment provisions; insurance plans against illness, disability, and old age; all differentiated by branch. Employers and employees can work together to increase production and markets, and in general, each within their sphere of influence, promote the flourishing of their companies. They can draw up rules governing contracts, factory regulations, days off, Sunday rest, and so much more—all in the context of their companies and therefore directly relevant and practicable.³⁸

The state’s role was to enforce these jointly made decisions and consult with chambers of labor and chambers of commerce when doing so.³⁹ Adhering to a tripartite model of industrial cooperation between the state, labor, and capital, the Dutch could both answer the pressing needs of the *proletariat* and honor the sovereignty God had bestowed upon society’s separate spheres. Kuyper’s ideas of tripartite cooperation, Ballor writes, factored into a growing tradition of consensus decision-making in the Netherlands that became known as the “polder model.”⁴⁰

Conclusions

These three brief case studies on family, freedom, and fortune illustrate the method, depth, range, and prescience of Kuyper’s public theology. Kuyper moved freely from close biblical and catechetical exegesis to lofty philosophical and theological propositions and had a real talent for pithy op-eds and soaring speeches. He expounded at length his core principles of creation order, common grace, and sphere sovereignty but worked hard to translate them into specific precepts, prescriptions, and policy statements—all amply leavened with a hearty Dutch ethic of common sense, generosity, prudence, practicality, and political adaptability. Kuyper remained faithful to the Reformed and broader Christian tradition. He was particularly drawn to the core teachings of Calvin, who had led a comparable sweeping reform of church, state, family, school, charity, economy, publication, and diplomacy in sixteenth-century Geneva, which he set out in fifty-nine thick volumes of *Opera* that were being published just as Kuyper set out to work

³⁸ OBE, “Industrial Organization.”

³⁹ Ibid.; “Manual Labor,” part 5.

⁴⁰ Jordan Ballor, “Text Introduction” to Kuyper, “Industrial Organization” in OBE.

in earnest.⁴¹ But while Calvin, on his death bed, had famously instructed his successors to “Change nothing!” in Reformed Geneva, Kuyper consistently embraced the more enduring Calvinist teaching to “Reform always!” as being more faithful to Scripture and tradition, more responsive to the needs of church, state, and society, and more effective in witnessing to the whole world.

This latter ethic of *semper reformanda* made Kuyper an ideal mediator of the evolving Calvinist tradition and an ideal broker to contend with the strong new forms of liberalism, socialism, capitalism, and fascism in his day. On marriage and family questions, Kuyper largely stuck to the Calvinist tradition. He conceded little in response to the multiple movements of his day for women’s rights, marital fluidity, divorce reform, sexual liberation, and more, convinced that this would jeopardize the place of the marital family as a cornerstone of church and state, society and culture. On issues of freedom, Kuyper expounded robust theories and policies protecting freedom of religion, speech, press, and association, which in his view captured the best of the Calvinist tradition and accommodated the best insights of modern liberalism. Kuyper’s theory of ordered liberty and orderly pluralism lay at the heart of his party’s political programs for the Netherlands, although he thought the United States better approximated these ideals than any nation in Europe. On issues of fortune, Kuyper worked hard to defend the rights to property, labor, rest, and business, based on biblical principles. But given the ravages of the Industrial Revolution, he struck pragmatic new balances between church and state in providing for the poor, needy, and unemployed and in constructing new systems of pensions, social welfare, and diaconal care.

This is just a sampling of the many treasures in Kuyper’s new twelve volumes of *Collected Works of Public Theology*. The editors and publisher have done invaluable service in bringing these rich writings together in a crisp critical English edition, expertly translated, judiciously edited, and handsomely produced in both print and digital formats. These volumes will help support the welcome Kuyper renaissance that is breaking out in many parts of the global Protestant world.

⁴¹ See recently Matthew J. Tuininga, *Calvin’s Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ’s Two Kingdoms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Calvin’s writings were published as *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum et al., 59 vols., Corpus Reformatorum Series 29–87 (Brunswick: Bretschneider, 1863–1900).