

UNDERSTANDING THE VIEWS

PANEL ON PUBLIC THEOLOGY

In order to help readers to reflect on the definition of public theology, *Unio cum Christo* invited thinkers and theologians with different perspectives to answer the questions below. We hope that the answers will help our readers better understand public theology. Some divergences emerge, but so does much common ground between those views. Robert George's answers are based on an interview conducted with Peter Lillback via Zoom; two additional questions and answers are included that were part of that conversation.

1. *How is your position fitted to address the problems of public theology?*
2. *Does natural theology have a contribution to make to public theology?*
3. *How do you conceive of law and gospel in relation to social issues?*
4. *What is the role of common grace in the present secular situation in the West?*
5. *What would be the best outcome of the present secularization other than Christ's return?*
6. *From your point of view, what is the major problem with other positions?*

NATURAL LAW POSITION

Robert George, Roman Catholic Philosopher, USA

1. *How is your position fitted to address the problems of public theology?*
I am not a theologian; I am a philosopher. Yet I read a fair amount of theology and find it very illuminating. My public theology consists of two things: theological reflection on issues in public life and the proclamation of the gospel in the public sphere beyond the Christian community, in the secular world. I believe that both are essential. Though I am not a

theologian, most of my work has to do with addressing issues in public life, and I freely and truthfully draw on theological works in my philosophical witness in the public square.

2. Does natural theology have a contribution to make to public theology?

Yes, I think it does. By natural theology we mean what can be known about God and spiritual matters on the basis of rational reflection, independently from “special theology” or revelation. By revelation I am speaking about what is revealed about God in Scripture and distinguishing it from what we can know about God from unaided reason; what can be known to such thinkers as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, or Cicero. They do not have access to the biblical witness but nevertheless reflect on life, ethics, justice, science, and scientific questions. So debates, for example, over the existence of God in the public square, with the new atheists, are useful and fruitful and illuminating. I think it is great for Christian thinkers, Christian philosophers, and theologians to engage issues of what can be known about God—that he exists, that he is supreme, that he has certain attributes—in debate with people who have their doubts about God or think that if he exists, he cannot be trusted.

3. How do you conceive of law and gospel in relation to social issues?

Well, we need them both. They are not in conflict or in tension. The gospel message includes teachings about what is just and unjust and how we ought to organize ourselves in communities and as societies; those are issues that are pertinent to law. The law, even our civil law, cannot be severed from the gospel. Here the witness of Martin Luther King Jr. is extremely helpful. He brings the gospel message to bear on questions of justice, especially regarding the lost. He had in mind segregation and the regime of Jim Crow, which were especially unjust to African Americans, who were deeply disadvantaged by these laws. So King understood law and gospel as integrally connected and bearing on questions of public and political life, including what the law ought to be and ought not to be.

4. What is the role of common grace in the present secular situation in the West?

Common grace is a phrase associated with certain traditions but is not commonly used in my own tradition, Catholicism. We are in the natural law philosophical tradition. I believe that in some Christian Protestant traditions, common grace is roughly equivalent to natural law in Catholicism, going back to Aristotle. Now natural law reflections or common grace is indispensable to our exploration of questions of morality and justice in

public life and beyond public life. Often, we cannot understand in depth the proclamation of Scripture without philosophical reflection. What Genesis 2 says about marriage as the conjugal union of husband and wife illustrates this well: the notion that man leaves his father and mother and becomes one flesh with his wife (v. 24). Philosophical reflection is required to understand, for example, that Scripture here, or God speaking through Scripture, is not merely suggesting that marriage is just an emotionally intense relationship. To understand what the Bible is saying literally, we need to bring reflection to bear in understanding marriage's qualities and features—between a man and a woman, not two men or two women, or numerous partners. That it is something to be pledged for life—not for a term of years, like a business contract. That it has to be sexually exclusive; there must be fidelity. An open marriage is not really a marriage. Jesus reminds us that Moses's permission of divorce was aberrational and goes back to Genesis 2, the beginning (cf. Mark 10:5–9). For Jesus, the permission to divorce should not be under the redeemed and restored order, but marriage in light of the conjugal union is for life.

5. What would be the best outcome of the present secularization other than Christ's return?

The best outcome for the present is a just social order, for which we must strive. Justice is not the rule of the strong but the giving to each of his due, founded upon the dignity of each individual. Jews and Christians have understood this concept in view of the teaching of Genesis 1 that we, unlike animals, are made in the image of the divine creator and ruler of the universe (v. 26). In a just social order, the common good is favored not only by public officials but by all members of the community. Human beings are provided with conditions necessary for flourishing across a range of dimensions as biological creatures, rational agents, relational persons (not purely for individual ends). Our actions and choices, shaped by others, can make things good or bad and build character. But it is for the common good and justice that the conditions—including freedom of thought, speech, and religion—are established and maintained, that are conducive to our flourishing. Certain institutions, above all marriage and family, are essential. These conditions are all critically important short of the return of Jesus in glory. We ought to work for justice, considered not just narrowly as fairness, important though it is. (The liberal tradition has really gone wrong in narrowly focusing on just fairness.) Human flourishing is much richer and more variegated than that. Justice requires that we attend to the conditions of flourishing for all those dimensions.

6a. From your point of view, what is the major problem with other positions? This is highly theological, but I will let you take this question any way you would like. I have benefited from reading Kuyper and the works of Kuyperians, and I find a lot to like there. It is not clear to me where Kuyperian ideas about justice and the common good and my own differ. I do not know theonomy well. I have read a little bit of the work by Rousas Rushdoony and just did not get it at all. The idea seems to be that you should run the world, even in circumstances of pluralism, according to Old Testament Jewish law. That strikes me as a bad idea for all sorts of reasons, including that there is not really a warrant for it in the Bible and there is much in the Bible that would seem to go against it. What I did read of theonomy did not interest me enough to make me want to read more. By contrast, I want to read more from the Dutch Reformed and the Kuyperian tradition because I think that is very illuminating and useful.

I am a natural law theorist and Catholic, although not all natural law theorists are Catholic. It is important to note that an understanding of the natural law, what can be known by unaided reason, does not imply you know everything you need to know to have a better society. That is not true. We know a lot about justice and the common good on the basis of reflections on natural law and natural rights, but our knowledge can be profoundly enriched by understandings beyond knowledge by unaided reason, especially by revelation. It has been enormously helpful to people like me to understand that there is a foundation to human dignity in that human beings are made in the very image and likeness of God. There is a divine law, and the principles we get from it are not out of bounds when it comes to thinking about justice and the common good. Also, from Genesis 1 and 2, we get that the created order is ordered, that it is intelligible. Not all traditions or civilizations got hold of that great insight. Further, the created order is good. God himself judges that it is good. That becomes the basis of all science, all inquiry. Something else, God sees that it is not good for man to be alone (Gen 2:18). There is a broader concern than the marital bond there. Our relationships with other people are not and should not be purely instrumental relationships; we are enriched by social bonds such as family ties, friendship, associations through shared convictions. Here again a profound insight into the social nature of man.

6b. We hear much about social justice today. Can we distinguish between justice and social justice?

The term social justice has been hijacked by a movement that is progressive and secularist in ideology. Prior to that it was a noble term used by Catholic

popes in the traditional Catholic social teaching. My conversations with James Kurth have illuminated my understanding of this tradition. In the Catholic social teaching, social justice simply means that category of justice that is concerned with society, whether political or nongovernmental social institutions. Those latter ones have, according to this tradition, the primary role in providing people with health, education, and welfare and transmitting to each new generation the values and virtues that are necessary if people are to lead successful lives and be good citizens. So social justice is about civil society and the political order and their relationship in this great tradition.

Yet that is not the whole of justice. There is also, for example, the justice that is required in the family, in an ordinary friendship, in a business partnership. But unfortunately, today social justice means something different and is bound up with identity politics, of Marxist inspiration, and therefore atheistic. The term has been used in an effort to establish secular progressivism as functionally the state's religion. So I think it is important not to be fooled by the high-sounding and once-noble phrase *social justice*. And properly understood, we should be working for social justice all the time. But we need to oppose that hijacked version of social justice.

6c. What would be your response to critical race theory that seems to be so tearing us apart?

Critical race theory names a whole lot of things. Although some has wisdom to it, a lot is misguided because it falls into identitarianism and tribalism and follows the idea is that the fundamental engine of history and society is conflict. This is Marxian. Indeed, critical race theory tends to buy into the idea that history and society are driven by conflict, yet not necessarily class conflict. In revisionist Marxism, following people like Herbert Marcuse, the conflict can be race, ethnicity, multiple genders, sexual orientation. These kinds of conflicts are what drives society. There can be no real hope for unity despite their differences unless they recognize a more fundamental commonality in virtue of having been made in the image of God. For Marx, conflict is unavoidable: someone is going to ultimately win, and someone is going to ultimately lose. Class conflict would drive the working-class people to the point of revolution, and they would prevail. Then, the classless society, the Marxist utopia, would be established. It follows that somebody has to exercise power in a sort of authoritarian fashion over other people who disagree. And, true to form, basic principles of justice, especially principles of civil liberty, go out of the window: freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion. We invoke them when they help our side, but

we do not grant them to the people on the other side. When people on the other side claim them or appeal to them, we dismiss them as mere tools of oppression. I am very worried about that in academic life. The collapse of freedom of speech on campus by formal mechanism or most often by informal mechanism (the cancel culture, the shaming, the outraged mobs, the use of social media) are all pernicious manifestations of this conflictual model that you find in critical theories.

TWO-KINGDOM POSITION

David VanDrunen, Reformed Theologian, USA

1. How is your position fitted to address the problems of public theology?

I take “public theology” to mean theological reflection on public life. I present my position in detail in *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020). It sets public theology in a covenantal context. Specifically, it recognizes that God (re-)ordained the ordinary activities of human society after the great flood in the Noahic covenant (Gen 8:21–9:17), a covenant universal in scope and preservative in purpose. Grounding public life in the Noahic covenant has several benefits. First, it follows a general Reformed, covenantal approach to theology. Second, it explains why God is the sovereign Lord of public life and why public institutions are accountable to him. Third, it explains why participation in public life is not limited to Christians but open to all human beings, and thus also why Christians may and ought to work alongside unbelievers in the public square. Fourth, it has a robust theology of Christians as sojourners and exiles—always an important theme, but perhaps increasingly so amidst recent cultural changes. Finally, it utilizes a classical Reformed category (the two kingdoms, or twofold kingdom), and does so in a way consistent with the American Presbyterian revision of the Westminster Standards regarding the civil magistrate.

2. Does natural theology have a contribution to make to public theology?

I will take “natural theology” in the sense of the knowledge of God and his will made known in natural revelation. Understood in this way, natural theology is crucial for public theology. Scripture provides general teaching on the character of public life and the obligations of social institutions, and this teaching is normative. But Scripture provides nothing like a comprehensive blueprint for these issues. As Proverbs for instance indicates, God’s people gain wisdom for ordinary life in great measure through experiencing,

observing, and reflecting upon the world around them. By this wisdom obtained through natural revelation, we come to perceive concretely how to live and work with one another peacefully, justly, and productively. Public life is impossible without this. These reflections may also point to another advantage of the approach to public theology summarized in Answer 1: The same Noahic covenant that (re-)established ordinary human activities also (re-)established the natural, cosmic order through which God reveals his nature, character, and will.

3. How do you conceive of law and gospel in relation to social issues?

All areas of life are under God's law. God reveals his law in different ways in different contexts, and it applies in different ways to different social institutions, but God's law is the standard for them all. The gospel, on the other hand, promises redemption for sinners, whom Christ now gathers into his church and will welcome into his new creation on the last day. All things will be redeemed in the sense that this present creation will attain its consummation in the new creation. But the gospel never promises the redemption of particular political, legal, economic, and other public institutions. Instead, God has established and preserves public institutions for provisional purposes here and now. I assume that when the question asks about "social issues" it refers to the affairs of such public institutions. Thus, God's law determines how we are to evaluate "social issues," and the revelation of the gospel does not change that. Of course, redeemed Christians ought to serve God and neighbor in public institutions as part of their grateful obedience.

4. What is the role of common grace in the present secular situation in the West?

It is probably true that the pre-secular "Christian" West often overlooked the importance of *common* grace and that our increasingly secular societies overlook the need for grace altogether. Nevertheless, the role of common grace has not changed as the West has become increasingly secularized. By common grace, administered through the Noahic covenant, God preserves and governs the natural world, human society, and public institutions within it. He does so for multiple purposes, most importantly to promote his own glory and to provide a forum for accomplishing his redemptive work. All of that is as true now as it was in the twentieth century, the sixteenth century, or the first century. It will remain true until Christ returns.

5. What would be the best outcome of the present secularization other than Christ's return?

The New Testament church was born in the first century into the very religious Greco-Roman world, yet it suffered severe persecution. There are obviously deep problems with our contemporary secularized societies, but thus far Christians, within these societies, have enjoyed broad liberties to worship, raise their children in the faith, and evangelize. In fact, Reformed Christians enjoy greater liberties now than they did in many so-called Christian societies before secularization began. One good outcome, then, would be that Christians continue to experience these liberties, even if they find themselves increasingly marginalized in public life. But in the big picture, the “best outcome” other than Christ’s return is the same in our secular society as in any other cultural context: that Christians remain faithful under whatever adverse circumstances they face and continue to gather the harvest of Christ’s elect into his church.

6. *From your point of view, what is the major problem with other positions*

Kuyperian: I assume that “Kuyperian” here refers to post-Kuyper neo-Calvinism (which has important differences from the thought of Kuyper himself). As I see it, neo-Calvinism’s major problem is that it places an eschatological burden on Christians’ ordinary cultural endeavors by approaching them under the categories of *redemption* and (Christ’s eschatological) *kingdom*.

Catholic, Natural Law: There are many versions of Roman Catholic natural-law theory, and my evaluation would differ depending on which is in view. But even the best of them, I believe, fail to understand natural law in proper theological context. In particular, they do not place natural law in proper relationship to the biblical covenants, common grace, or the biblical, Reformation gospel.

Theonomist or Reconstructionist: Theonomists fail to account for the covenantal context of the Mosaic judicial laws. God instituted the judicial laws through the *Mosaic* covenant to govern a unique and holy people for provisional and typological redemptive-historical purposes. Political communities today are not under the Mosaic covenant and are not holy, redeemed, typological societies. Thus, the Mosaic judicial laws per se are not appropriate for them.

Philip Tachin, Reformed Theologian and Public Official, Nigeria*1. How is your position fitted to address the problems of public theology?*

The comprehensive mission of God in the world provides the template for our cultural engagements. Our confessional and ethical principles are God's instruments of change such that while we work in the world, we are not of it. Our ethical pedagogy underscores the transformation of the whole person and society, not through a theocratic approach but by the evident sanctifying power of God in our vocations. Christ's recognition of the things of God and of Caesar provides an insight that avoids extreme theological postulations concerning public affairs. Rather, we are to be exemplars of citizenship. The overall objective of faith and life is to point to the glory of God by our words and conduct. The significance of my position is not only in avoiding extremes in the prevailing views but also creating a rapport between the secular and spiritual so that believers can be intellectually equipped to effectively engage the secular vocation with an evangelistic goal.

2. Does natural theology have a contribution to make to public theology?

This question concerns how we can beneficially understand our world and ethically align ourselves properly in the presence of God (*coram Deo*). Though the creation speaks volumes of God's glory, wisdom, and power (Ps 19), natural theology has its limits in answering the issues in theology proper and complex human society. Sin always obstructs our accurate understanding of the world and the will of God regarding how we should collaborate with him in governing the world to his glory. The natural man gives the glory of God to idols or denies him (Rom 1:19–20; 3:9–18; Pss 14:1–3; 53:1–4). However, Scripture gives us the proper interpretation that enriches our theological understanding and conduct. Calvinism teaches that all true knowledge begins with knowing God, and our love for him is the fountain of our love for our neighbor and our society (cf. Matt 22:37–39). By natural law or theology, we can appreciate that unbelievers are held accountable for negligence, but we know this truth only in Scripture (Rom 1:19–23). Natural theology is useful, but it is by the re-creative and redemptive power of the gospel that the natural knowledge of God comes to fruition.

3. How do you conceive of law and gospel in relation to social issues?

The social functional of the law is to create order by restraining moral evil. Calvinism sees the law as an instrument by which the state protects all groups of people in the society, the weak and strong. Therefore, the rule of law is what Christians should strongly advocate. The social issues that

concern the law should also concern the gospel, and there should be no selective justice in addressing the issues affecting humanity. Scripture provides explicit and implicit principles in dealing with social issues. Though the law condemns and the gospel offers hope, they are not antithetical; rather, they strengthen each other. The Bible and our confessions do not endorse either antinomianism or legalism but maintain a harmony between the law and gospel. The divine intent of the law is to regulate our thoughts, attitudes, and behavior in line with God's righteousness and justice. It serves as our guide to glorifying God in all that we do, whether in private or public (1 Cor 10:31). The gospel restores us to God to live in obedience in *all* things, just as Christ, who is the substance of the gospel, was not against the law but comprehensively fulfilled it.

4. What is the role of common grace in the present secular situation in the West?

By common grace the secular is better appreciated as God's realm where unbelievers are also endowed with various gifts. All truth, excellence, and beauty belong to God, and secular duties come under the realm of God in Christ. Christians, rather than separating from the world, should be involved so that the Spirit of God might nurture and cleanse it by demonstrating the righteousness of God. God works through civil governments to create order through laws that restrain the excesses of evil in society. The scope of Christian engagement is comprehensive since Christ claims every sphere, both in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18–20; Col 1:15–17; Heb 1:3). Therefore, Christian involvement in politics, business, and civil society is biblical and should be encouraged. In all these areas, proclamation of the gospel in actions must be unambiguous. Common grace frees Christians from timidity for participation in world affairs.

5. What would be the best outcome of the present secularization other than Christ's return?

The eschatological reality posits a heightening antithesis between secularization and spirituality. By and large, secularization drives the global agenda without being inconsistent with the prophetic word of Christ on the principle of the "narrow" and "wide" gates (Matt 7:13). The forces of globalization, seeking to enforce secular principles that accentuate human autonomy and freedom, try to denigrate Christian principles, which favor the flourishing of economic growth, politics, and development. Modern secular views hold that religion is irrelevant because technological development that has brought about prosperity stands on secular foundations. However, the gospel insists that our undying agenda is to point people to the glorious

kingdom of God, not through legislation but by righteous actions in the wider context of the public square (Matt 5:14–16; Phil 2:15; 1 Pet 2:12; John 15:8; Matt 9:8). Just as Christ is the light of the world (John 8:12), so also our call to godly actions encompasses church and society. Believers have a comprehensive calling that shapes the preaching of the gospel and the reforming of society. God will continue to reconcile the world to himself in Christ Jesus (2 Cor 5:18–20).

6. *From your point of view, what is the major problem with other positions*

Kuyperian: Kuyper went to the extreme of making common grace foundational to culture and history, claiming that common grace, rather than the eternal decree of God, holds the creation together. This has no scriptural basis. Common grace is not correlative with the power of God or his providence, and its core point is ethical rather than metaphysical. Therefore, we cannot create a Christian state on the basis of common grace.

Two-Kingdom: This view limits the kingdom of God and the activity of believers to the institutional church, narrowing their involvement in secular society. Luther uses this dichotomy that parallels the law and gospel. In the two-kingdom concept, this dichotomy is so sharp that it is difficult to see how Christians can actively and meaningfully engage in the secular. This misses the comprehensive mission of God that has been entrusted to believers in the world.

Catholic, Natural Law: Catholicism has put unrealistic confidence in natural law by unaided reason to provide a “solid and indispensable” moral foundation for civil law. This seems contrary to Aquinas, who said, “The natural law—without the divine law—is inadequate to direct man to his final end, addressing the inherent shortcomings of human judgment, assessing a person’s interior life, and punishing or forbidding all evil deeds by means of the human law.”¹ Rather, biblical law enriches and informs natural law.

Theonomist or Reconstructionist: Theonomy holds that all things come under the sovereignty of God and claims that Old Testament laws are universally applicable in all of public life. It fails in its exegesis of Romans 2:12: God holds all nations accountable on the basis of natural laws that are concreated in the human conscience and not, as claimed, on the basis of the Jewish law. Jews and Gentiles come under the rule of God through distinct operational principles (cf. Luke 12:47–48).

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, I.II, Q. 91, art. 4, response; online: <http://www.microbookstudio.com/>.

KUYPERIAN POSITION

Richard J. Mouw, Reformed Theologian, USA

1. How is your position fitted to address the problems of public theology?

In the not-so-distant past, when theologians addressed issues in public life, they frequently did so under the headings of “social ethics,” “church and state,” and “political theology.” In recent years, however, “public theology” has come to be treated as an acceptable theological subdiscipline. This is an important gain. The domain of the “public” is much broader than what was covered by those older rubrics. Public life encompasses what goes on in banks, editorial offices, stadiums, the aisles of supermarkets, neighborhood organizations, and much more. This broad scope fits nicely with Abraham Kuyper’s manifesto that Christ is Lord over “every square inch” of creation. Theologians must pay attention to all that Christ cares about. A key emphasis in the Kuyperian strand of Calvinism is the insistence that God built the capacity for a complex “public” life into the original creation. The “fill the earth” mandate in Genesis 1 is about cultural development (v. 28). Human beings were to add to the primal Garden by cultivating family life, collective decision making, the arts, technology, economic patterns—all to the glory of God. Human rebellion introduced distorted cultural development, and God’s renewing purposes in Israel, and then the church, aim at calling into being a redeemed people who would show forth his original cultural intentions in the midst of a fallen world.

2. Does natural theology have a contribution to make to public theology?

Natural theology is seen as what believers and unbelievers should—in principle, at least—agree upon on the basis of general revelation, without appeals to the contents of special revelation. Natural theology, then, presupposes the reality of natural, or general, revelation. If there is a natural theological understanding, it must be in response to theological truths that God has revealed independent of special revelation. For Kuyperians the important question is the degree to which sin has distorted the capacity of fallen human beings to grasp properly what God reveals in nature. The Reformed confessions strongly affirm that God reveals himself in the natural world, but they question the degree to which those living in rebellion against God can make positive use of these deliverances. The Westminster and Belgic Confessions, for example, see the primary impact of general revelation as leaving sinful humankind “without excuse” in continuing to oppose God’s purposes (cf. Rom 1:20). When John Calvin argued that ancient “pagans” offer us teachings from which believers can gain truth—Calvin

was fond of Seneca's writings—he saw this not in terms of a “natural” capacity unaffected by sin, but as due to the bestowal of a “peculiar grace”—such that, Calvin argued, if we refuse to accept truth from these sources we “dishonor the Spirit of God.” The deliverances of general revelation are not completely lost to the fallen human consciousness. The young child who responds to a parental verdict with “But that’s not fair!” is manifesting a grasp of a basic sense of justice. But our sinful natures do not consistently benefit from these remnants of our original natures. Thus Calvin, when he credits the sinful consciousness with acknowledging God-honoring truths, does not rely on a “natural” capacity in fallen persons, but on the active working of the Holy Spirit in specific contexts. This emphasis is at the heart of Kuyper’s “common grace” perspective, where God is seen as using the talents of unbelievers in positive ways to further the cultural development that God intends for his creation.

3. How do you conceive of law and gospel in relation to social issues?

Since God has ordered the entire creation in a lawful manner, his lawful ordinances affect both the nonhuman aspects and the various spheres of cultural life. Each cultural sphere has its own special character, with its unique patterns of authority. For example, the divinely ordained ways of exercising leadership in the family are different from the ways of exercising authority in the church or the university or the business corporation. Since these patterns have been corrupted by our collective sin, God calls his redeemed people to work at restoring his creating intentions. Reformed moral theology has always insisted—against, for example, Lutheran and Anabaptist ethics—that the law is fulfilled in the gospel’s call to live a life of love. But for the Kuyperian, love takes different forms in different spheres. Familial love differs from the love the gospel requires among citizens of a nation, and the love that binds together a guild of Christian artists seeking to glorify God in their aesthetic pursuits differs from the way love manifests itself in relations within a farmers’ cooperative. This Kuyperian attention to the ways in which biblical teaching has to be applied to patterns appropriate to diverse spheres accounts for the fact that this perspective has generated detailed contributions to the “theology of work.” Faithful discipleship in a specific cultural sphere requires more than the individual qualities of honesty, a cooperative spirit, reliability, and a commitment to “personal witnessing.” As important as those qualities are, our public engagements require a love of justice, stewardship, and promoting the common good. The law of the Lord extends to all areas of public life, and the life of love must therefore take the form of a public love.

4. What is the role of common grace in the present secular situation in the West?

God designed the original creation with the capacity for developing a rich and complex cultural life. Humanity's rebellion against God's creating purposes did not mean that this design was obliterated. By sovereign saving grace, God chose to call into being a redeemed people—Israel, and then the New Testament church—to continue to establish cultural patterns that would glorify him. But God also uses persons outside of the redeemed community to further his cultural program. Some of this happens by the mysterious ways of providence, whereby God restrains the cause of evil. Common grace teaching, however, adds an important dimension: God also shows a nonsalvific favor to non-Christians by harnessing their talents to add to the storehouse of what the Scriptures describe as “the glory and honor of the nations” (Rev 21:26). Unbelievers write excellent poetry and produce fine paintings. Atheists perform acts of justice. Muslim parents devote themselves sacrificially for the well-being of their children. In the workings of common grace God gifts unbelievers—again, nonsalvifically—to provide positive blessings to the human community as such.

5. What would be the best outcome of the present secularization other than Christ's return?

It could be that the continuing secularization of life would itself create conditions that would lead to a genuine spiritual revival. Secularization is a historical process of disconnecting various areas of human association from obedience to God-ordained norms—a process that Christians unwittingly promote when they limit the exercise of faith in God to matters of “personal faith.” Kuyper argued that sphere sovereignty is also a historical unfolding, as spheres of cultural interaction gradually differentiate from each other. A common example among Kuyperians is the tribe, which, when it was a prominent pattern of collective identity, was a kind of merging or blending of spheres: the tribe was a kinship entity that also had political, economic, religious, and recreational aspects that have gradually unfolded into separate diverse spheres (family, state, economy, church, and sports). The downside of this historical differentiation is the fragmentation of “selves,” a phenomenon that has been celebrated by the more radical expressions of postmodern thought: a person's role as a father has no integrative connection to his role as banker, basketball fan, consumer of online entertainment, or political partisan. The result is not unlike the condition of the Gadarene demoniac who told Jesus, “My name is Legion, for we are many” (Mark 5:9). The result in the Gadarene case was a demonstration of Jesus's

sovereign power. It could be the same for what results in human lives from the fragmentation of selves. In the Christian arrangements, the multiple spheres are integrated by and in the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We escape the fragmenting of our selfhood by submitting to his authority in a personal relationship with the One who holds all things together. In a time when fragmentation increases, it could lead many persons to recognize the devastating personal effects of secularization and to turn to Christ for the integrating power of salvation. If that does not happen, the situation is indeed a frightening one.

6. *From your point of view, what is the major problem with other positions?*

Two-Kingdom: There really is only one kingdom, presided over by the One to whom all authority in heaven and on earth is given (cf. Matt 28:18). The Two-Kingdom view is certainly right to posit differences between, say, church and state, each of which occupies different spheres, with differing patterns of authority and focus. But those are only two of a larger number of unique arenas of cultural “business,” with each of the arenas functioning under the direct rule of Christ. To live with the assurance that every knee will someday bow before him (cf. Phil 2:10) is for believers to honor him in the present as the One to whom we owe our ultimate allegiance in every sphere of life. The Two-Kingdom approach sees God’s governance of public institutions beyond the church as “provisional,” with all that they represent ultimately being “consummated” in the fullness of the kingdom of Christ. Thus, the claims of the gospel have no “redemptive” application to this larger public arena. Institutions such as art museums, stadiums, national legislatures, and banking systems have no eschatological significance. We Kuyperians insist that these spheres were present from the beginning in God’s creating intentions, and what has been accomplished in human history in politics, the arts, and the like will not be “consumed” when Christ returns, but will be a part of what is transformed and refined when he makes all things new. The basic Kuyperian contention here is that God has multiple creating and renewing purposes for the creation. One of these purposes is, of course, saving sinful human beings and incorporating them into a new community of the redeemed. But the eschatological gathering in of the riches of culture is also a part of the plan.

Catholic, Natural Law: Kuyperians strongly affirm the reality of natural law. Our problem with the Catholic appropriation of the natural law idea is the emphasis on a shared human capacity to grasp properly the guidance that natural law provides. For us the underlying error here is the way Catholics, and Christians in some other traditions, endorse the notion of

prevenient grace. Catholics rightly accept the ways in which the fall into sin seriously damaged the human capacity to discern truth and goodness. But they understand God to have issued, in response to those realities of human depravity, a kind of “universal upgrade,” whereby God restored the ability of all human beings to understand truths about God’s will for human living and to make free choices for or against conforming to those truths. Like the Kuyperian teaching regarding common grace, prevenient grace is nonsalvific. But for the Kuyperian common grace is not a generic act of a partial repairing of human capacities for truth and goodness. Common grace has more of an *ad hoc* character. When, say, Seneca discovered a truth, it was because the Holy Spirit was working in Seneca’s own heart and mind, nonsalvifically making use of the remnant of a rational capacity that was not completely eradicated in him by the impact of his fallen condition.

Theonomist or Reconstructionist: Kuyperians reject the Theonomist insistence that our social-political calling is to reconstruct in present form the revealed laws and policies that were given by God to ancient Israel in its national calling to establish and maintain a theocracy. We hold to the pattern of “principled pluralism,” which means that we advocate for, and work to establish, a pluralistic social arrangement *as a matter of principle*. In a society in which persons of diverse worldviews and lifestyles live together, we want the right to configure our Christian communities in accordance with revealed truth, and we want this same right for groups with whom we disagree on fundamental matters. Muslims and atheists also have the right to configure their collective lives in accordance with their respective convictions. One advantage of this arrangement is that we as Christians are free to invite others to join us in living in obedience to the claims of the gospel without being accused of imposing our beliefs and values on others by employing political-legislative strategies. Obviously, this principled pluralism perspective has to face challenges regarding how to understand maintaining these patterns within a framework of promoting the common good of the larger society. But even those challenges can serve as opportunities. They motivate us to engage in dialogue with others about the implication of our respective worldview for our understandings the *common good*—which can itself open up opportunities for Christian witness as we await the coming of the fullness of the kingdom with the return of Christ.