

## Calvinism, Catholicism, and the American Experiment: What Is the Question?

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One of the important inhabitants in the fantasy world of academia—admittedly something of a dull though creepy place—is the good (if not great) idea and title of a book or journal article conceived but never written. My own favorite not-yet published (nor written) article is entitled “Avery Dulles: Model Catholic Theologian.” Father Dulles’s clear, articulate, and stimulating paper—raising all the important issues and providing thoughtful suggestions and answers—was one more demonstration that he is not only a model theologian but a master teacher and effective pastor. I am truly honored to share this platform with him today.

The question that Father Dulles raises can be rephrased: “Can a good Roman Catholic also be a good American, fit for public office, even, let us say, to be President?” Thankfully, for us in 1998, thirty-eight years after it was a significant issue in a Presidential campaign (and thirty-eight years after the publication of John Courtney Murray’s *We Hold These Truths*), to ask the question as directly as I just have, seems itself to be remarkable. “Can a Catholic be President?” Is it not an odd question? Has a similar question ever been asked about other Christian traditions in America? How about: “Can a Calvinist Presbyterian possibly be President?” Did anyone ever consider Woodrow Wilson thus religiously disqualified? Or, “Can an Anglican (okay, let us be devious and disguise them by calling them Episcopalians)—can an Episcopalian be President?” It was never asked of President Bush, was it?

How about a Methodist, a Mormon? Or, “Can a Southern Baptist be President?” (Actually, now that we know the answer to that one, it probably will be asked, down the road.)

Let us simplify matters somewhat and, in keeping with the dual focus of our conference, follow up Father Dulles’s discussion of *why* the question arises in the context of Catholic social teaching and briefly track it in the Calvinist one. The reason that it is asked about Roman Catholics, Father Dulles has shown us, is that for the Catholic tradition of social teaching, while religious pluralism is acknowledged as good and necessary for a free society, it remains something of a concession, even a “lamentable” concession, that may be dangerous for the course of liberty itself. The reason? Because genuine liberty is rooted in and can only be sustained by the *truth* concerning God, the world, and humanity. It is precisely this epistemological and sociopolitical realism, rooted in divine revelation, that makes secularists nervous—nervous that a religiously based commitment to freedom, in fact, has religious tyranny as its cleverly disguised telos. At this point we need to remind ourselves that there are as many good historical and theological reasons for such secularists to be wary of Calvinists in American public life as there have been said to be reasons for wariness about Catholics taking their marching orders from Rome in an attempt to establish a confessional State. In fact, I believe that much current secularist anxiety about religion in the public square arises from what the Catholic and Calvinist traditions have in common and helps to explain the marriage of convenience reflected in such culture war cobelligerence as the “Evangelicals and Catholics Together.”

Perhaps it strikes us as peculiar to link Catholics and Calvinists so closely together as equal potentially hostile threats to American polity. After all, is Puritan Calvinism not the essential spiritual foundation of the American experiment in ordered liberty? Abraham Kuyper thought so; not only did he make this claim in his 1898 Stone *Lectures on Calvinism*,<sup>1</sup> but the conviction goes back to the very beginning of his public reflections on politics in an 1874 published address, “Calvinism, the Origin and Guarantee of Our Constitutional Liberties.”<sup>2</sup> Here, as later in the 1898 Princeton Stone Lectures, Kuyper cites American historian George Bancroft: “My nation’s enthusiasm for freedom was born from its enthusiasm for Calvinism.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, another favorite Kuyper quote from 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>4</sup> Kuyper buttressed his argument that Calvinism was the origin as well as the guarantor of constitutional and civil liberties with a historical argument: Switzerland, Holland, England, and finally

America must be honored as singular examples “with a special certificate of suitability for political freedom. Outside their borders you will look in vain for the origin of our freedom.”<sup>5</sup>

The reason is clear, according to Kuyper. All four nations represent a developing political vision that reflects a Calvinist conviction about the full and complete sovereignty of God. There are only three possible options for political sovereignty, according to Kuyper. The *popular sovereignty* of the Paris Commune in 1789, the Teutonic-inspired notion of *State sovereignty*, or a derived and limited State sovereignty *under divine sovereignty*, a sovereignty that yields further to independent sovereign social spheres. Here is how Kuyper summarized it in his Stone Lectures:

In a Calvinistic sense we understand hereby, that the family, the business, science, art, and so forth are all social spheres, which do not owe their existence to the State, and which do not derive the law of their life from the superiority of the State, but obey a high authority within their own bosom; an authority which rules, by the grace of God, just as the sovereignty of the State does.<sup>6</sup>

Kuyper’s case for linking civil liberty with Calvinism is, thus, both an historical argument as well as a theologically based social-metaphysical one. Historically, as he saw it, it is the lands where Calvinism flourished that developed polities honoring and protecting liberty. But from the theological root principle of Calvinism—“cosmologically, *the Sovereignty of the Triune God over the whole Cosmos*, in all its spheres and kingdoms, visible and invisible,”<sup>7</sup> Kuyper also derived a social ontology with a clearly defined *derived* sovereignty in the State, society, and Church.

It is possible to find fault with details of Kuyper’s historical argument, though, even that other famous Genevan, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, hardly a card-carrying member of the Christian Coalition, nonetheless praised John Calvin for his contribution to liberty! “Those who consider Calvin only as a theologian fail to recognize the breadth of his genius. The editing of our wise laws, in which he had a large share, does him as much credit as his *Institutes*.... [S]o long as the love of country and liberty is not extinct among us, the memory of this great man will be held in reverence.”<sup>8</sup> Yet Kuyper’s argument needs qualification and nuance. He overlooks the contribution of the Baptists, for example. I also find more persuasive than Kuyper’s historical restrictions Jean Bethke Elshtain’s argument that the roots of political liberty and democratic polity need to be traced further back than the sixteenth century to the early Church. Her argument is simply that “Christianity introduced a

strong principle of universalism into the ancient world even as it proclaimed a vision of the ‘exalted individual’ brought into being by a loving Creator, not, therefore, the mere creature of any government, any *polis*, any Empire.” The end result of this “moral revolution” was the endorsement of an “elemental freedom.” “Liberated individuals formed communities to validate their new-found *individualities* and to shore up the transformed, symbolically charged good represented by the new social body; the body is one but has many members.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, the coming into existence of the Christian Church as a many-membered unified body and as an alternative society with its own ultimate allegiance,<sup>10</sup> combined with its anthropology that gave new dignity to man as God’s image bearer, was the main originating contributor to the world’s history of lasting ordered liberty. Second, as James Bratt, has shown in a very helpful essay, Kuyper misread the roots of the American order because he “magnified New England into the United States as a whole,” thereby ignoring the South and, very ironically, marginalizing “the mid-Atlantic region and with it possible Dutch contributions to the United States.”<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, his historiographical missteps notwithstanding, let us for the sake of argument grant Kuyper his general portrait of the positive role played by historic Calvinism in the development of liberty. We then need to ask historic Calvinism some tough questions. Let us begin with Calvin.<sup>12</sup>

We need not acquiesce with Roland Bainton’s unkind judgment that “if Calvin wrote anything in favor of religious liberty, it was a typographical error,”<sup>13</sup> to grant that Calvin’s description of the magistrate’s responsibility gives us problems with respect to full religious freedom. The magistrate who, we must not forget, has legitimate coercive sword power, is called upon by God, according to Calvin, to uphold the first as well as the second table of the law. It is therefore the task of magistrates to protect, promote, and nourish true religion as much as it is to punish thieves and murderers and defend the cause of the poor and fatherless.<sup>14</sup> Calvin finds it preposterous to imagine being more concerned for intrahuman justice than for the honor and glory of God related to true worship. Similarly, the author of the 1563 Belgic Confession—who, incidentally, was martyred for his faith—nonetheless penned a theocratic ideal paralleling Calvin’s. Article 36 of the Belgic Confession, “The Civil Government,” includes the following:

And the government’s task is not limited to caring for and watching the public domain but extends also to upholding the sacred ministry, with a view to removing and destroying all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist; to promoting the kingdom of Jesus Christ; and to furthering the

preaching of the Gospel everywhere; to the end that God may be honored and served by everyone, as he requires in his Word.

In the interest of time I will not cite the passages in other Reformation Confessions such as the First and Second Helvetic Confessions, the Westminster Confession, and the Scots Confession that attribute the same task to the magistrate. My point here should be obvious: Its fabled reputation for liberty notwithstanding, the Reformed confessional and theological world, no less than the Roman Catholic magisterial tradition of social teaching traced by Father Dulles, must contend with a literary legacy of expressed theocratic desire.<sup>15</sup> The best society is a Christian society where God's will, supported by the magistrate, if necessary, is the rule of life. When Calvinists and Catholics enter the contemporary North American public square as *self-consciously Christian* citizens, both groups take the baggage of that legacy along with them.

Actually, for those of us who take Abraham Kuyper seriously as a model for contemporary distinctively Christian social and political thought and action, the problem may even be worse than I have just sketched it. Let me open for you a small window into the world of Kuyperian political rhetoric: a world that has familiar sounds in it for those of us who have more recently heard the language of the contemporary American Religious Right. The date is May 12, 1891 (for orientation purposes, *Rerum Novarum* was released to the public three days later on May 15, and the Dutch Christian Social Congress where Kuyper delivered his rightly famous address, *The Problem of Poverty*,<sup>16</sup> that invites comparison with *Rerum Novarum*, was still six months away), the occasion: the Anti-Revolutionary Party Convention in the city of Utrecht. Kuyper's convention address carries the clarion title, "Maranatha."<sup>17</sup> He begins by noting that this Christian cry is the crossroads dividing the ARP delegates from their political opponents. "To them the return of the Lord is an illusion hardly worth the laughter of ridicule; to us it is the glorious end of history—also the history of our national existence—which we invoke with the laughter of a holy joy" (207). Kuyper insists on the *political* significance of the "Maranatha" cry. What does it imply? Just this: that, when the history of nations will have exhausted itself and cannot continue, the king anointed by God will appear to intervene in the life of *our* nation, to strike his sickle also into the harvest of *our* national life, and *to destroy* the anti-Christian world power "with the breath of his mouth" (2 Thess. 2:8). By contrast, "of this reality the Conservative, the Liberal, the Radical, and the Socialist have no inkling.... They refuse to acknowledge Jesus' royal authority in the sphere of

politics” (208). “If one does honor the Lordship of Christ, he to whom has been given all power and authority in heaven and on earth,” Kuyper asks, “then obviously it will not do to confess all this of peoples and nations without applying it to *your own nation*, without taking account of it in the Netherlands *even today*” (211).

This confession does not lead Kuyper to postmillennial optimism, thanks to a progressive Christianization of the nations; on the contrary, he reminds his listeners of the scriptural teaching that “in the end,” matters will get worse as “an appalling *anti-Christian* world power [will arise] which, if Christ did not break it, would rip this whole world forever out of the hands of its God and away from its own destiny” (211). This anti-Christian power, Kuyper contends, has already gained command in nineteenth-century Holland and Europe. Later in the speech, Kuyper notes that a major difference between his audience and their political opponents is that they believe in Satan while their opponents do not. This calls for a *Kulturkampf*. The Maranatha cry means “You may not join them or connive with them. Nor may you abandon the country to them” (213). Heady stuff, and by merely substituting such contemporary villains as “secular humanists,” “moral relativists,” “liberals,” “Democrats,” very familiar stuff. Marching orders for a crusading army of theocrats.

But now here is the remarkable thing: Kuyper openly admits that this heated rhetoric was pitched so high to motivate his troops lest they get bogged down in the nitty-gritty details of the upcoming political campaign. Kuyper admits that he is using the pitched rhetoric to mark the enemy clearly so that “we may experience a holy thrill if our basic drive is love for Christ. Only those who know that they are propelled by that love will be powerful in this campaign (214). But, you ask, does Kuyper not know the enormous risks of thus demonizing one’s political opponent and triumphally baptizing one’s own cause? Does he really want each election campaign to be a *jihād*? Well, yes, he knows the risks; and, no, he does not want a crusade. In this same speech he pleads for fairness in appreciating the positive notes even in the anti-Christian choruses of the other side: “Nor in our own country,” he notes, “would you be entirely fair if you failed to appreciate our Conservatives’ *historical bent*, neglected to honor our Liberals’ *love of liberty*, overlooked the Radicals’ *sense of justice*, and counted as noting the nobler Socialists’ *compassion* with so much indescribable misery” (212). And then, amazingly, on the other side, though he had just cooperated with them in a coalition government, Kuyper contends that the issue that separates Calvinist anti-revolutionaries from their Roman

Catholic compatriots “is the sacred cause of *freedom of conscience* for which we, like our ancestors, would again shed our blood and against which they, however accommodating their practice, remain fundamentally opposed” (219). And finally, once again the good Kuyper: “*Freedom of conscience*—precisely for that reason we must employ *persuasion* to the exclusion of *coercion* in all spiritual matters.... In the civil State, all citizens of the Netherlands must have equal rights before the law” (219–21). In this vein, we need to note that it was largely through Kuyper’s initiative that in 1905 the Dutch *Gereformeerde Kerken*, in a decision paralleling Vatican II’s declaration, *Dignitates Humanae*, excised from Article 36 of the Belgic Confession the troubling passage about the magistrate’s responsibility to protect and promote true worship.<sup>18</sup>

Where does this leave us? I do not have the time to sort out the back-and-forth ambiguities in Kuyper’s public rhetoric, which exhibits both a passion for religious freedom and a theocratic impulse with the former; in fact, rooted in the latter. To use the language of a later Dutch Reformed theologian, Arnold A. Van Ruler: Theocracy is the only foundation for toleration.<sup>19</sup> In some sense I happen to think that is true but, and here is our problem: How do we enter the public square with that conviction and principle? I suggest that from the Kuyper legacy we can learn and use the following:

First, we should use history as an argument for the necessity of faith in achieving a sound civic polity. Our historical argument should not be that of Kuyper’s, pitting Calvinist freedom fighters against Roman Catholic opposition to religious freedom—not after Vatican II and especially not after our wicked twentieth century that went to extreme lengths to prove the truth of Dostoyevsky’s dictum that “When God is dead, everything is permissible.” Contemporary secularists fear that evangelicals and Catholics are both closet theocrats simply because we believe that Jesus, and not Caesar, is *Kurios*. There is probably no way we can talk them out of that mistaken notion, but there is plenty of evidence available (the story of freedom in Poland and other Eastern European countries should still be fresh on our minds) that the real threat to human freedom in the twentieth century was the atheistic apotheosis of the State to which the alternative and counteralliance of the Church to Jesus is an essential antidote. We need to begin by just repeating the truth, simply telling that story over and over again. Tell our children and the world about Maximilian Kolbe, Laszlo Tokes, and Father Jerzy Popieluszko staking their very lives for the Gospel and for freedom.<sup>20</sup> Only by placing our lives on the line for others can we demonstrate our commitment to freedom of conscience for all.

Second, we need to enter the public square with a well-developed, attractive, persuasive social ontology. Here, too, we simply tell the truth about marriage, family, children, and the gospel of life. The Statement “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” affirmed that “as we are bound by Christ and his cause, so we are bound together in contending against all that opposes Christ and his cause.”<sup>21</sup> The times have, I believe, clearly placed the cause before us: the protection and dignity of life itself. John Paul II’s encyclical *The Gospel of Life* describes it thus: “*The Gospel of God’s love for man, the Gospel of the dignity of the person, and the Gospel of life are a single and indivisible Gospel.*”<sup>22</sup>

Finally, here is where we must enter Kuyper’s key theme (shared by Leo XIII, as Father Dulles’s last quotation indicates): the sovereignty of God. Is there any other way to promote the Gospel of Life? “We must obey God rather than men.” An essential conviction protecting us from apotheosizing the State. But we must enter the public square with this affirmation positively:

“We must obey God rather than men!”

This means: defending the cause of the weak, the vulnerable, the unborn, the poor, the homeless, the handicapped, the terminally ill, and the elderly from our culture’s purveyors of death.

“We must obey God rather than men!”

This means: We will not succumb to the idolatry of consumerism but vow to be stewardly users and caretakers of the Creator’s world.

“We must obey God rather than men!”

This means: We must insist as Christians that we have a right to speak in the public square; we will not be silenced by the powers of the age.

Nonetheless, we must realize that we will only earn the right to be heard if our deeds, our very lives demonstrate our sacrificial commitment to life, to love, and to justice. That is the real question and final answer about theocracy.

## Notes

1. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1931), passim.
2. Abraham Kuyper, “Calvinism: Source and Stronghold of Our Constitutional Liberties (1874),” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 279–322; original (and fuller) translation by J. Hendrik de Vries published in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 52 (July and October 1895): 385–410, 646–75.



3. Ibid., 283.
4. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 78.
5. Bratt, *Centennial Reader*, 283.
6. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 90.
7. Ibid., 79.
8. For this reference I am indebted to its citation by John Witte, Jr., “Moderate Religious Liberty in the Theology of John Calvin,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 31 (1996): 359–60; the reference is to *Du contrat social*, bk. 2, chap. 7, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and the Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, ed. Lester G. Crocker (1792; reprint, New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), fn. 44.
9. Jean Bethke Elshtain, “‘In Common Together’: Christianity and Democracy in America,” in *Christianity and Democracy in Global Context*, ed. John Witte, Jr. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993), 71.
10. This greater allegiance results in a notion of “dual citizenship” with a genuine concern for the earthly *civitas* checked by an ultimate allegiance to, and hope for (!), the heavenly one. The classic statement of this dual citizenship is found in the early church document, “The Epistle to Diognetus” (found, *inter alia*, in vol. 1 of the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*).
11. James Bratt, “Abraham Kuyper, American History, and the Tensions of Neo-Calvinism,” in George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam, *Sharing the Reformed Tradition: The Dutch North American Exchange, 1846–1996* (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1996), 102.
12. For a thorough and balanced treatment of Calvin and religious as well as political liberty, including the significant scholarship on the question, see the essay by John Witte, Jr. cited in note 8.
13. Roland H. Bainton, *Concerning Heretics ... An Anonymous Work Attributed to Sebastian Castellio* (New York: Octagon Books, 1935), 74; cited by Witte, “Moderate Religious Liberty,” 361.
14. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), IV.xx.9.
15. One of the best surveys of the entire Reformed confessional and theological legacy of theocratic desire that the magistrate defend and promote true (i.e., Reformed worship) is the study committee of advice to the Synod of the Dutch *Gereformeerde Kerken* about deleting the offending passage on magisterial involvement in worship, chaired by Kuyper’s fellow neo-Calvinist, the theologian

- Herman Bavinck, *Advies in zake het Gravamen tegen Artikel XXXVI der Belijdenis* (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, 1905).
16. Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, trans. and ed. James W. Skillen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1991).
  17. Text can be found in Bratt, *Centennial Reader*, 205–28; page references to this work will be given in the body of the text.
  18. See Bavinck et al., *Advies in zake het Gravamen tegen Artikel XXXVI der Belijdenis*.
  19. See, for example, Arnold A. Van Ruler, “Theocracy and Toleration,” in *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics: Essays in Public Theology*, trans. and ed. John Bolt (Lewiston, Ontario: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 167–98.
  20. For a rich fund of such stories, see Barbara von der Heydt, *Candles Behind the Wall: Heroes of the Peaceful Revolution That Shattered Communism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993).
  21. Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds. *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas: Word, 1995), xxii.
  22. John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life* (New York: Random House, 1995), 5.