

Abraham Kuyper, Conservatism, and Church and State

Mark J. Larson

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The target audience for this book is conservative American Christians looking to make sense of a culture that seems increasingly indifferent if not hostile to their core convictions. Such believers could do a lot worse than looking to the wisdom and life of Dutch theologian, politician, journalist, pastor, and all-around polymath Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920). Scholar Mark J. Larson has written this book to introduce this audience to Kuyper and to achieve two primary aims. The first is to claim Kuyper as a political conservative, an early prototype of the recently developed school of American conservatism (4). The second is to persuade readers that judicial tyranny threatens the United States, and they can do something about it.

Larson pursues his first aim by describing what counts as conservatism, emphasizing various figures and strands while arguing that a core stream of thought begins with Edmund Burke's reaction to the French Revolution and moves through the American Founders to its most recent spokesman, Ronald Reagan. Larson moves back and forth between conservative themes and Kuyper, showing the latter's affinity with antiradical thought, tradition, limited government, separation of church and state, and a healthy respect for the role of God in any flourishing society.

In his sixth chapter, Larson shifts gears from exposition of Kuyper's relation to conservatism to contemporary application. He describes the dangers of government overreach, and makes familiar but still trenchant claims about how the United States Supreme Court has committed several judicial usurpations of power. The tone of the book shifts here, as Larson accuses several sitting judges of being tyrants, and contrasts them with judges such as Alabama's Roy Moore and the late Chief Justice Rehnquist. Larson follows this indictment with a subsequent chapter in which he suggests a plan of resistance and renewal, relying on a grass-roots movement of Christians who will play a key role in reforming the judiciary and other key institutions once their churches begin preaching the whole counsel of God (79).

There are virtues in Larson's book. He displays an awareness of many important figures in Reformed thinking, the American political tradition, and contemporary Kuyper scholarship. He has done his homework. It is also hard to go wrong with such intrinsically interesting topics as the separation of church and state, conservatism versus liberalism, and the role of the judiciary in addressing contentious issues, for instance, abortion and homosexuality. Most fascinating of course is Larson's main character in the book, Kuyper himself.

If there is a fatal flaw to the work, it is that Kuyper is too big for it. One might be able to do a layman's introduction to Kuyper's politics in under a hundred pages, though even that would be a challenge. Larson is tackling a much tougher task in introducing Kuyper, *and* making the case that conservatives have a stronger claim on him than progressives, *and* showing how his church-state thought is primarily Madisonian, *and* recruiting Kuyper

to persuade the readers that judicial tyranny exists and tell them what to do about it. The problem with addressing all of these topics in such a slim volume is that no one of them gets the treatment it deserves, and many questions are left unanswered.

For instance, what does it mean to claim that Kuyper is a conservative if what counts as conservative can include both Abraham Lincoln as a “the statesman of American conservatism” (7) and the vociferous slavery advocates Robert Dabney and James Thornwell (14, 15, 22, 44, 54)? It would be one thing to note the valuable contributions of Dabney and Thornwell while acknowledging that both supported slavery as an intrinsic good (as opposed to Jefferson’s necessary evil). Any historical account of conservatism, particularly one that is going to reclaim a Dutch Calvinist giant like Kuyper, cannot ignore the place of race and slavery in American (or South African) history—particularly when one of the key emphases of Calvinist political thought is freedom (61).

On a less controversial matter, it would also have been enormously helpful for Larson to lay out the progressive case for Kuyper. Larson does a fine job of showing *that* various Kuyperian scholars disdain conservatism (2–3), but some representation of *how* these scholars would defend their progressive views *vis-à-vis* Kuyper would have been a useful foil. Larson does make a convincing case that Kuyper was more conservative than progressive (though some treatment of Kuyper’s debt to Hegel would be welcome), but laying out each side would have made his case even stronger.

Finally, the final two chapters of application present an argument for cultural renewal that is at best unpersuasive. Larson rightly points out the problems with judicial usurpation, but his solution calls for Christians to work through the executive and legislative branches of the government to check judicial overreach. This strategy might have held some promise when there was more of a cultural consensus that was friendly to the moral concerns of conservative Christians. Whenever that consensus held sway, it is long past. The Supreme Court’s overreaches have been wrong both in substance (same-sex marriage, abortion) and in process (overriding democratic majorities), but is there any reason to think Christians can call on the efforts of past champions of the religious right such as Roy Moore and D. James Kennedy to succeed in enacting conservative legislation by popular vote? Perhaps there is a reason, but such a case would take a significant argumentative effort that would be working uphill given the cultural trends of the last sixty years.

What would Kuyper say for Christians today? Would he advise starting an explicitly Christian party (as he did) or would he tell conservative Christians to continue working with the Republican Party as it is? Would he encourage us to invest in more Christian-specific enterprises (newspapers, universities) or be a salt-and-light presence alongside our nonbelieving fellow citizens? The best compliment on hand for Dr. Larson’s book is that its subject matter is so crucial and its questions so fundamental that it calls for even more substance, more thinking, and more Kuyper.

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