

The Boundaries of Our Habitation

Why We Need Nations

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This article argues that to Abraham Kuyper human diversity, including nationhood, is God-ordained and fundamentally good. In that light, this paper explores Kuyper's perspective on: how nations differ from states; how they are to be understood both eschatologically and ecclesiologically; the benefits and bond of national diversity; and in conclusion, the difference between sinful loyalty and an appropriate patriotism of compassion, recommending the latter for our politics today.

Introduction

Abraham Kuyper takes on some heavy philosophical topics in his essay “The Blurring of the Boundaries,” which he delivered as his final rectoral address at the Vrije Universiteit in 1892. He starts off decrying Nietzsche's influence, and moves on from there to diverse topics, including Scheiermacher's theology, various themes in Indian and Chinese religions, and Darwinism. Two-thirds of the way through his lecture, however, as he prepares to set forth the virtues of Calvinism as an alternative to what he labels “the slithering fluidities of pantheism,”¹ Kuyper pauses to mention a recent athletic victory of a Dutch cricket team, a group of “batters and bowlers,” who had “recently returned from England showered with honors.” Kuyper confessed that Dutch athletes' achievements brought him great delight. “But,” he quickly added, “I would have greater joy to see in the rising generation of young men enthusiasm for the honor of our history, for our country, and for all that is lovely, pure, and beautiful.”²

National identity is an important matter for Kuyper, and it was connected in his mind to crucial theological matters. He makes this clear in his Stone Lectures, where he blames the French Revolution for attempting to impose an “imperial unity” on humankind with the aim of obliterating “the national diversity of ethnic groups” in order to create a society wherein “peoples have been robbed of their characteristic genius and rendered homogenous.”³ From that perspective, he observes, the sense of belonging to a “fatherland” is to be treated as “a vestige of an earlier narrow-mindedness,” which must be remedied by concerted efforts to establish “one vast cosmopolis in which there would no longer be any east or west, north or south, but all of human life would be the same.”⁴

This desire for a “vast cosmopolis” was in fact, says Kuyper, the vision that was at work in Babel, in response to which the Lord scattered humankind, thus creating diverse tribes, nations, and peoples. And this diversity is not just a response to humankind’s sinful rebellion, Kuyper insists. The “diversity and dispersion” that God instituted in response to Babel actually serves, he argues, as the model for the “ideal unity” that has been made possible by “the promised Messiah, the head of humanity who is coming.” In the genuine Kingdom unity that has been guaranteed to us in Christ, “diversity is not lost but all the more sharply defined. On the great day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit did not speak in one uniform language; instead, everyone heard the Spirit proclaiming the mighty works of God in his own tongue. Though the wall of *separation* has been demolished by Christ, the lines of distinction have not been abolished. Someday, before the Lamb, doxologies will be sung to him who conquered not by a uniform mass of people but by a humanity diversified in peoples and tribes, in nations and tongues.”⁵

Thus, to Kuyper human diversity, including nationhood, is God-ordained and fundamentally good. In that light, this paper explores Kuyper’s perspective on: how nations differ from states; how they are to be understood both eschatologically and ecclesiologically; the benefits and bond of national diversity; and the difference between sinful loyalty and an appropriate patriotism of compassion.

Nations and States

When Kuyper says that he would like for the Dutch cricket players to have focused more on bringing honor to “our country,” he was not thinking of the Dutch *state*. Rather, he was focusing on the Dutch *nation*, Dutch people-hood. Unlike states, whose functions and offices are given to fairly precise accounts—that is what charters and constitutions do—the idea of a “nation” does not lend itself to precision. As David Koyzis has observed, the various attempts by

scholars to define the term *nation* over the past two centuries have not achieved a consensus. It is best, Koyzis concludes, “to content ourselves with a certain degree of ambiguity.”⁶

Even if we lack precision in defining “nation,” though, we can point to some things that characterize the bond of nationhood. Simone Weil gets at some of these features in her insightful book critiquing the ideology of the French Revolution, *The Need for Roots*: “Where a real civil life exists,” she observes, “each one feels he has an ownership in the public monuments, gardens, ceremonial pomp and circumstance; and a display of sumptuousness, in which nearly all human beings seek fulfillment, is in this way placed within the reach even of the poorest.”⁷

And there are many other things that undergird this sense of “ownership” of public events and spaces: patriotic songs; myths, legends, and stories; flags, pledges, and iconic images; holidays and civic celebrations—and more. All of that serves to sustain an enduring experience of national identity.

For Abraham Kuyper, while nations are distinct from states, under the conditions of our fallenness a nation needs to be supported by a state. In God’s providential ordering of fallen humanity’s collective life, Kuyper observes “peoples and nations originated. These peoples formed States. And over these States God appointed *governments*.”⁸

Kuyper saw the establishing of governments as we know them as a post-fall necessity, especially in their exercise of the ministry of “the sword” described in Romans 13, where God mandates that governmental authorities punish evildoers and reward those who do good. While the communal experience of peoplehood is intended in God’s design for creation, Kuyper insists that under sinful conditions government is necessary as “a stick placed beside the plant to hold it up, since without it, by reason of its inherent weakness, it would fall to the ground.”⁹

In employing the stick and plant imagery here, Kuyper is insisting that the primary purpose of the state—the stick—is to govern the people—the plant. The stick has no point without the plant. A nation can exist—at least for a while—without a government, but states order the lives of a people, a nation. Without statehood the continued existence of a people is a vulnerable thing. That was the case made by the Zionist movement in the nineteenth century: The Jewish people were a stateless people, scattered among many nation-states—they could not maintain their identity unless they attained their own statehood.¹⁰

Also, a people can maintain their identity while abandoning one form of government for another. Thus, the well-known words in the Preamble to the American Constitution: “We the *people* of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union . . . *do ordain and establish* this Constitution for the United

States of America.”¹¹ It is also the pattern at work in 1 Samuel 8, when the elders of the people of Israel come to the prophet Samuel and ask a new form of government: “You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have” (1 Sam. 8:5).

Eschatology and Nationhood

Again, according to Kuyper nations require the formal apparatus of statehood because of their “inherent weakness” under the conditions of human fallenness. He clearly saw the Babel impulse—the desire to absorb specific peoplehoods into a generic “cosmopolis”—as a serious threat. And many current debates about the loss of national identity—discussions among current members of the European Union are a case in point—are occasioned by this kind of worry.

There has been extensive theological attention paid to the theology of the state and to political authority, but very little to the relationship between the state and the *nation*. And while Neo-Calvinists, with our emphasis on the importance of maintaining diverse spheres of cultural life have come close to addressing the larger picture of a vibrant sense of nationhood, we would do well to take this on now as a topic for specific focus. In his Stone Lecture on politics Kuyper does say that one of the tasks of the state is to “bear *personal* and *financial* burdens for the maintenance of the natural unity of the State.”¹² But what we might label the “moral-spiritual” unity of the state really has to do with the more fluid realities of a sense of shared peoplehood. And this unity cannot not be created or imposed by a government. It is indeed a “natural” unity that must flow from deeper sources than government policies.

Where issues touching upon ideas of nationhood and peoplehood *have* been dealt with theologically in recent decades is in the attention given, both in missiology and by Christian “identity” movements, to the theological significance of such factors as race, ethnicity, class, and gender factors. One way to view these explorations is as a much-needed remedial effort to eliminate cultural biases in order to prepare for life in a kingdom in which contextual differences will no longer be relevant because all will be one in Christ. For Kuyper, however, contextual differences among peoples will carry over into eternity. Nor was this insistence incidental to his overall perspective. Herman Bavinck put the basic Neo-Calvinist point well in his own account of the eschaton: “Tribes, peoples, and nations all make their own particular contribution to the enrichment of life in the new Jerusalem.... The great diversity that exists among people in all sorts of ways is not destroyed in eternity but it is cleansed from all that is sinful and made serviceable to fellowship with God and each other.”¹³

Ecclesiology and Nationhood

The eschatological element is a key factor in early neo-Calvinism's views regarding the significance of diverse contextual identities in the kingdom. And while my main concern here is to look at what this means for nations and peoples, it is important also to be aware of the parallel that we can see in Kuyper's ecclesiology, where we can discern a strong "localism" is a play in his thinking.

In his Stone Lecture on "Calvinism and Religion," for example, Kuyper also makes much of the necessary "multiformity" of the church. In church life, too, he says, recognizing "the differences of climate and of nation, of historical past, and of disposition of mind" must be honored.¹⁴ This means, Kuyper says, that there should be "no other church-power superior to the local churches."¹⁵ And even within a particular national context local congregations, as the primary ecclesial entities, must be viewed as "of equal rank, and . . . can only be united . . . by way of confederation."¹⁶

Kuyper does acknowledge the dangers connected to this ecclesial multiformity. The differences often lead to "much unholy rivalry, and even sinful errors of conduct." For all of that, though, multiformity is also "more favorable to the growth and prosperity of religious life than the compulsory uniformity in which others sought the very basis of [the church's] strength."¹⁷

We cannot go too far, of course, in drawing parallels between entities in different Kuyperian spheres. But Kuyper's comments about churchly multiformity do underscore the emphasis that we often find in his writings on preserving social boundaries that fit people's "natural" experience rather than those that are imposed by some kind of "hierarchical" dictates. In his political thought, for example, Kuyper can on occasion even make the sorts of stipulations that are associated with the Catholic principle of subsidiarity, as in his observation in his Stone Lecture on politics that "it may be remarked that the social life of cities and villages forms a sphere of existence, which arises from the very necessities of life, and which therefore must be autonomous."¹⁸

The "necessities of life" reference here a telling one. In the case of peoples and nations, it is not just that God happens to like diversity. This diversity—the reality of belonging to specific identity groups—is, in God's creating and redeeming purposes, *good* for human beings. Indeed, it is *so* good that the real dangers posed by the nurturing of these identities are outweighed by the benefits. I will get back to the dangers a little further on, but first I want to say some things about the benefits.

The Benefits of Diversity

As Christians we ought to know that we are not ultimately defined by our ethnic, racial, or national identity. We have become new creatures in Christ, who has “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,” making us into “a kingdom and priests to our God” (Rev. 5:9–10 ESV).

Kuyper certainly emphasized that. What unites us to the community of the universal church, he said, “is much stronger, firmer, and more intimate” than any other human bond. But that bond of Christian identity actually results from what he calls the “double work of the Holy Spirit,” which also causes “our hearts to be drawn to all that belong to us by virtue of our *human* kinship.”¹⁹ And he waxes eloquent about our shared humanness: “Belonging together, living together upon the same root of our human nature, it is one flesh and one blood, which from Adam to the last-born child covers every skeleton and runs through every man’s veins. Hence . . . the claim that nothing be alien to us that is human.”²⁰

So beyond what we experience as citizens of a given nation, or as possessing, say, a specific ethnic or racial identity, we must recognize two more important bonds—the bond of Christian unity and the even more basic bond of created human kinship. The key word here, though, is “beyond.” These less-than-ultimate bonds do function in good ways in our formation as human beings. We should not—indeed we cannot—eliminate them. But we do need to keep them as less-than-ultimate in our understanding of who we are.

The framework for keeping them in their proper place is suggested in this comment by John Calvin:

It is the common habit of mankind that the more closely men are bound together by the ties of kinship, of acquaintanceship, or of neighborhood, the more responsibilities for one another they share. This does not offend God; for his providence, as it were, leads us to it. But I say: we ought to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love; here there is no distinction between barbarian and Greek, worthy and unworthy, friend and enemy, since all should be contemplated in God, not in themselves.²¹

Not only is God not offended by what binds us together as family, friends, neighbors—and I think we can add, as fellow citizens—but the Lord providentially *uses* these ties to bring us to a place in our moral-spiritual development where we can develop the higher responsibilities that come with the acknowledgement of the bonds of our humanness as such. Children need to learn what it means to belong to families and peer groups before they can expand that awareness to a shared human kinship.

The Bond of Nationhood

But more now on the specific bond of nationhood. It is a key element in God's creating and redeeming purposes, said Kuyper, but it possesses an "inherent weakness" in our fallen world. Kuyper was particularly worried about what happens when a given nation loses its unique "genius" when it is drawn into "one vast cosmopolis."

We can test the Kuyperian case by asking a very contemporary question: Would Kuyper be a Brexit supporter? Or, closer to home for him, an advocate for a Dutch withdrawal from the European Union?

In a recent review essay in *Commonweal* magazine, Paul J. Griffiths examines British philosopher Roger Scruton's book discussing the Brexit referendum. Scruton generally favors withdrawal from the European Union, and he sees much of the pro-Brexit sentiment grounded in a fear of losing a national "home."²²

Griffiths finds much that is helpful in the way Scruton lays out the issues. Many of those who cast a pro-Brexit vote, says Griffiths, "no longer felt at home in their own country because too much was changing too fast," and they were convinced that EU membership was a big part of the problem.²³

But, Griffiths observes, Scruton is able to make his case only by his tendency "to write 'Britain' when he should write 'England.'" The fact is, says Griffiths, that many votes in Scotland and Northern Ireland were cast *against* Brexit, and in those cases the *support* for European Union membership comes from a love of local identities. Many Scots and Northern Irish wanted "to protest the submerging of their local cultures and identities into Englishness." Their votes were based on the conviction that it is possible to sustain local language and customs *within* the framework of EU membership. The lesson here, says Griffiths, is that we can separate, "analytically at least, the legal and political processes of governance from the need for a home."²⁴

In his address on Mars Hill, the Apostle Paul quoted the Old Testament declaration that the many nations come from an original created unity, and that the Creator has also established "the boundaries of their habitation" (Acts 17:26; Deut. 34:8). Obviously, in the providential development of human history these boundaries shift—but the fact of divinely ordained boundaries is unchanged. There is nothing intrinsically unbiblical, then, about specific nations banding together to form alliances that have broader patterns of legal and political authority.

The Sin of Inappropriate Loyalty

Let me review my basic points thus far, building on Kuyper's analysis. Multiple nations are a key element in God's creating and renewing purposes in the world. It is a good thing to have "local" loyalties. We begin as children with a strong sense of the familial bond. That extends to the bonds of friendship, and as we mature, we come to expand this into a broader sense of national identity. John Calvin then pushes this a step further; we must also come to see *all* human beings as our neighbors—and we do this by seeing them "in God, not in themselves."

In our sinfulness, however, we can easily stumble along this developmental path, by refusing the loyalties that are grounded in what Kuyper called the "root of our human nature." When it is the nation, or nation-state, that becomes the object of an inappropriate loyalty, then special dangers can arise.

Note that I just used the phrase "inappropriate loyalty." Many Christian critics of a nationalist spirit are inclined to use "idolatry" in this regard. While I do not deny the real threat of idolatry in this important area of life, I am reluctant to use that designation too quickly.

Here is why. To be patriotic is to love the "fatherland" (or the "motherland"). In that sense the love of nation has a parallel to the love of parents. And to love one's own parents more than the parents of other individuals is not a moral defect as such. We can even tolerate some hyperbole in this area: "You are the greatest mother in the world!"

Similarly, it is not bad as such to love one's home county more than one loves other countries. The problems arise when that love takes the form of an *inordinate* affection. This can happen in a number of ways. One is when misdirected affections occur *within* the nation, just as sibling rivalries often disrupt family life. Another is when we refuse to care at all about the well-being of other peoples and nations—as in the "America First" mentality right now in my own country.

Because nations are much larger entities than families, the dysfunctions that occur in these macro-entities are especially dangerous. Paul Griffiths points to these dangers with reference to Brexit matters. Yes, he says, the pro-Brexit are understandably confused by the rapid pace of social change in recent years. But they are often also "*morally* confused. They don't see that much in the erstwhile fabric of their homeland is implicated with injustice, racism, and xenophobia."²⁵

These "-isms" are threats to human well-being in contemporary life. Obviously, some remedies for these unrighteous patterns can be found in political and legal measures. But ultimately these concerns have to be dealt with as matters of the spirit. And this is where the Christian community must respond creatively to the challenges. Those of us in the neo-Calvinist community have

rightly insisted that the state cannot simply make public justice happen through the instruments of government. The state must also promote a general climate for public justice. But the real moral-spiritual work must be done within the various societal spheres.

For Christians to take this task of public justice seriously in our specific national contexts, this certainly means promoting a biblically-grounded awareness of our identity as members of a community drawn from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, through the marvelous, redemptive mission of the Lamb who was slain. To promote this self-consciousness requires, I am convinced, a *spirituality* for public life. This certainly means that local congregations must be, as the late Harvard theologian Ronald Thiemann proposed, “‘schools of public virtue,’ communities that seek to form the kind of character necessary for public life.”²⁶ But we Neo-Calvinists should insist that this “schooling” should take place in other sphere-specific Christian organizations as well.

These efforts at a robust spirituality for citizenship should promote, first of all, the goal of *being* a Christian presence in our specific nations: a people who provide a visible witness to the fact that we take with utmost seriousness what Kuyper called the “double work of the Holy Spirit” in our life-together within the Christian community. We care about strengthening our own national bonds, knowing that this includes calling our fellow citizens to see the responsibilities that we have to all who dwell upon the face of the earth.

A Patriotism of Compassion

Simone Weil struggled much with what it meant for her to cultivate a genuine love for the French nation. Repelled by “a patriotism founded upon pride and pomp-and-glory,”²⁷ she finally concluded that the only proper form of patriotism for her as a follower of Christ was one “inspired by compassion,” a tender affection that sees her country as “something beautiful and precious, but which is, in the first place, imperfect, and secondly, very frail and liable to suffer misfortune, and which it is necessary to cherish and preserve.”²⁸

Weil is pointing us here, I believe, to the right kinds of dispositions to cultivate in our relationships to the nations in which God has placed us. And it is important too that she also refers to the need for each of us to work to “preserve” our national culture.

For Kuyper and Bavinck this preservationist requirement had eschatological significance. They were both fond of quoting Revelation 21:25–26, where we are told that the gates of the New Jerusalem will never be shut, “for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.”

And those Neo-Calvinist pioneers understood that each of us is required, in our own time and place, to do what we can to preserve and promote those things that God wills for his creation.

Kuyper commended the Dutch “batters and bowlers” for their athletic efforts in England because he knew that every square inch of the cricket field belongs to Jesus Christ. But he also knew that Jesus has larger concerns, which is why he expressed the wish that those athletes would also bear witness to “all that is lovely, pure, and beautiful.”

That is the kind of witness-bearing that is required of all who have chosen the patriotism of compassion. And it is clear that our compassion must be expressed in a special way these days as advocacy for those who suffer on the margins of our national cultures. The biblical declaration that “righteousness exalts a nation” (Prov. 14:34) provides us with a much needed insight into what will ultimately be taken into account when the true glory and honor of the nations enter into the gates of the eternal city.

Notes

1. Abraham Kuyper, “The Blurring of the Boundaries,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 397.
2. Kuyper, “Blurring,” 388.
3. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 24.
4. Kuyper, *Lectures*, 33.
5. Kuyper, *Lectures*, 35.
6. David T. Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003), 103.
7. Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 35.
8. Kuyper, *Lectures*, 92.
9. Kuyper, *Lectures*, 93.
10. Shlomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism: Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 11–13.
11. *The Constitution of the United States of America*, 1787, available at https://usconstitution.net/xconst_preamble.html, emphases mine.
12. Kuyper, *Lectures*, 97.

13. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3: *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 727.
14. Kuyper, *Lectures*, 63.
15. Kuyper, *Lectures*, 64.
16. Kuyper, *Lectures*, 63.
17. Kuyper, *Lectures*, 64–65.
18. Kuyper, *Lectures*, 96.
19. Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henry DeVries (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 645–46, emphasis mine.
20. Abraham Kuyper, *Holy Spirit*, 645.
21. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.8.55.
22. Roger Scruton, *Where We Are: The State of Britain Now* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 24–31.
23. Paul J. Griffiths, “The Idolatry of Home: Brexit and the View from Somewhere,” *Commonweal* 145, no. 13, August 10, 2018, 23.
24. Griffiths, “Idolatry of Home,” 24.
25. Griffiths, “Idolatry of Home,” 23.
26. Ronald Thiemann, *Constructing Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 43.
27. Weil, *Need for Roots*, 174.
28. Weil, *Need for Roots*, 175.