

# A New Direction for Kuyperian Economics

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The twentieth century project of Kuyperian economics critiqued and ultimately rejected large parts of the dominant neoclassical approach to doing economics, aiming to develop a normative and distinctively Christian methodology. In this article, I first summarize the elements of Kuyperian thought that are relevant to economics. Second, I describe the recent Kuyperian economics project, and the attendant critique. I conclude that the Kuyperian project remains valuable, but that it should change its focus. Future Kuyperian work should preserve the normative critique of modern economic ideologies and institutions, and should maintain the insistence that economics is fundamentally moral, while investing less in the methodological critique of neoclassical rational-choice theory that animated many earlier scholars. I argue that that approach is consistent with the spirit of the longer Kuyperian tradition and still offers scholars a window through which economics can be integrated with Christian anthropology and worldview.

## **Introduction**

The economics discipline is rich with questions about human behavior, social organization, human relationships, and justice. Economists, however, usually avoid the theological and ethical dimensions of these topics. We cannot make these questions go away, however, and too often we leave them to philosophers, theologians, and lawyers that have less of a background in how economic institutions function. This arrangement has served the church poorly. The notion that economics is only a pragmatic, technical exercise is too easily, and improperly,

translated into the idea that consumption, management, work, and taxation, are merely pragmatic activities or technocratic enterprises. In fact, they are all deeply moral. Amoral economic analysis feeds the notion that economic institutions (like markets) are morally neutral, which has left Christians ill-equipped to think theologically about some of the most pressing economic and social questions of our day.

There is a remedy for this problem. There are a number of careful Christian theological approaches to thinking about economic questions. This article makes a case for renewed and revised scholarly investment in Neo-Calvinist, Reformed, or “Kuyperian” economics. This school of thought traces its lineage back to Abraham Kuyper, the nineteenth-century Dutch theologian, journalist, politician, and social entrepreneur. There has been a stream of economics scholarship that builds on Kuyper’s thought, and there are a number of summaries of this thinking in print.<sup>1</sup> Three elements of this tradition stand out. First, these scholars have emphasized the essentially *ethical* nature of economic questions. Second, they have been deeply suspicious of the underlying anthropology, assumptions, and methodology of modern economics, particularly what is usually called neo-classical or rational-choice economics. Third, they have often engaged in a deep institutional critique of our economic lives.

The argument of this article is twofold. First, this strain of Neo-Calvinist Reformed theology is particularly well-suited to offering a helpful foundation for the study of economics. Second, Kuyperian economists have focused their attention on problems with neoclassical economic methodology, but going forward, a change of focus is warranted. In particular, there should be more attention paid to a Kuyperian “architectonic critique,” which combines traditional economics with systemic and theological thinking.

## **A Theology for Economics**

The Reformed Neo-Calvinist tradition is particularly well-suited to help social scientists think theologically about their subject matter. The timing of the Reformation and the social location of John Calvin meant that this tradition was formed in the crucible of social upheaval and the growth of a commercial society. In contrast to the Christian thought of the time—even that of Martin Luther—Lee Hardy notes that Reformed Christians learned to think critically about the whole organization of society: “In the face of these astounding changes on all fronts of social life, it became increasingly apparent that the structure of human society is in part a product of human activity. In turn, to the degree this activity

is motivated by sinful desires and worldly ambitions, the society thus formed is likely to be structurally unsound and in need of drastic reform.”<sup>2</sup> The Reformed emphasis on God’s Sovereignty, along with this critical eye toward social structures, was taken up with particular enthusiasm by Dutch Neo-Calvinists in the nineteenth century. Over time, a few key themes came to the fore that we can say are particularly “Kuyperian,” because Abraham Kuyper was influential in their articulation and application.

### **God’s Sovereignty**

First, while Calvinists are often known for asserting the depth of God’s sovereignty in soteriology (how are we saved?), Neo-Calvinists have asserted that the *breadth* of God’s sovereignty should motivate us to care deeply for all areas of creaturely existence. This is expressed in the strong emphasis on the doctrine of creation, and the associated doctrine of sphere sovereignty. The key instinct here is expressed in Kuyper’s famous “Every Square Inch” quote from a speech at the opening of the Vrije Universiteit (Free University of Amsterdam).<sup>3</sup> In this view, no part of God’s creation is outside the scope of Christian concern, including economics. Christians, therefore, should deeply explore, understand, and critique all areas of life. Moreover, after this exploration and critique, we are called to build and transform the world. Wolterstorff refers to this as “World-Formative Christianity.”<sup>4</sup> Economics is not merely a subject of interest; in this view, it is necessary for the work God has called us to do, restraining the full effect of sin upon creation as instruments of his common grace.

One of the implications of this view of God’s sovereignty is a suspicion of the distinction between the sacred and the secular, between grace and nature. This operates on two levels. First, the sacred-secular distinction can tempt Christians to give all their attention to concerns that are deemed strictly spiritual, and then to neglect the concerns that animate the discipline of economics. Kuyperians push back on that, insisting that we need to be deeply invested in “worldly” and material things. Second, this sacred-secular distinction has a kind of ethical counterpart: We are tempted to separate the world into things that have ethical significance and those that do not. For example, the world of business and economics might be mistakenly thought of as an amoral technical enterprise. We might think that the choice of a production technology in a firm is only a pragmatic question, and not a moral matter. Neo-Calvinists tend to think that the realm of things that are amoral or ethically neutral is smaller than is commonly thought. The choice of production technology, the Neo-Calvinist might say, may not be an item of moral controversy, but making the wrong choice could be wasteful or irresponsible,

and could thus be a moral failing. Even more importantly, perhaps, a Calvinist would insist that commercial life should be guided by our overarching aim to bring glory to God.

### **A High View of Work as Christian Vocation**

A second emphasis of this Neo-Calvinist tradition is a high view of human work. This is partly due to the aforementioned view of God's sovereignty, but it also has a root in a particular eschatological vision. Neo-Calvinists envision continuity between the world we presently experience and the new heavens and earth promised by the prophets. Accordingly, they will often adopt the view that human work points the way toward a coming kingdom that will incorporate and redeem the work that humans do here and now.<sup>5</sup> Neo-Calvinists see Christ's redemption as a story of progress: Christ does not restore the world to the state of the garden, but instead consummates creation with a city, complete with all of the technological, cultural, and artistic progress that was implicit at the moment of creation, but not yet realized.<sup>6</sup> Alsdorf describes this evocatively: "Reformed theology conceives of creation as a seed that is filled with growth potential or as a flower whose petals are slowly unfolding. God embedded in creation diverse patterns and potencies that human beings are always discovering, exploring, and developing."<sup>7</sup>

Even more directly, Reformed Christians have historically embraced the view that we have a holy vocational call to serve God in mundane human work. This was an egalitarian vision of work, in which God equally honored the work of the magistrate and the chambermaid, the pastor and the merchant. Each person is called to do their work before the face of God and in line with his intentions.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, though, all occupational structures and practices are potentially fallen and corrupted. Thus the faithful Christian was called to be diligent in their work, to always be alert for those practices and structures that needed reform, and to discern their calling with the help of God, rather than merely filling a pre-determined slot in the social order.<sup>9</sup>

This high view of work has never been limited to Reformed Christians.<sup>10</sup> The key observation of contemporary theology of work is that secular occupations and the marketplace are places where Christians can live into the image of God, do the broader work of the Church, and serve creation.<sup>11</sup> This theology can also serve as a grounding narrative for much of what is studied in economics, offering both a motivation for understanding economic institutions and a vision for calling out dysfunction and directing reform, particularly in work related to labor economics.<sup>12</sup>

## Antithesis

The theological themes discussed so far paint a broadly positive picture of Christians' engagement with culture. There is, however, a deep countervailing caution in the Neo-Calvinist worldview that prompts Christians to be wary of investing too deeply in any movement or ideology. Rooted in the Reformed conviction that the fall has affected every part of the created world, Kuyperian thinkers often label the misdirection of a created good with the term *antithesis*. Kuyper, in particular, warns that human ideologies that fundamentally misdirect human action are rooted in idolatry, and that this deep idolatry puts Christians at odds, in small ways or large ways, with any worldly philosophy or institution.<sup>13</sup>

For Kuyper, this instinct resulted in a real suspicion of the dominant economic ideologies of his day. He was keen to learn from the classical liberals, who had great influence at the time, particularly in England, and also from the burgeoning socialist thinkers.<sup>14</sup> He thought that both the liberals and the socialists made fundamental theological errors, however, that resulted in deep problems for both schools of political economy, and these ultimately created problems for the real functioning of economic life.<sup>15</sup> This conviction motivated his call for Christians to be deeply engaged in every area of academic life, since he believed that part of a proper response to the antithesis was this reformatory theological and scientific work.

## Kuyperian Economic Thought

While Kuyper was not a social scientist, he dealt regularly with economic themes in his writing and work. Perhaps out of frustration with the dominant schools of economic thought in his day, Kuyper called for “the development of a genuine Calvinist science of economics.”<sup>16</sup> It is somewhat difficult to say, at this point in history, exactly what Kuyper thought this would look like, but at minimum, it would leave a larger place open for ethical and theological inquiry.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the Neo-Calvinist movement spurred a number of different scholarly contributions to economics. Goudzwaard and Jongeneel offer four different types of Reformed scholarship in economics, ranging from thematic reflections on economics motivated by biblical themes to systematic treatments of economic theory and institutions.<sup>18</sup>

For the purposes of this argument, it is enough to distinguish between two strains of work, both thoroughly Kuyperian. One focused on developing a Christian economic methodology, a second focuses instead on economic institutions, subjecting them to what Kuyper called an “architectonic critique,” characterized by a

deep examination of the nature of a set of economic institutions, their theological/ideological foundation, and the outworking of those institutions in economic life. These two approaches often occurred together, but the conceptual separation between the two approaches is important.

Among American economists there has been a much closer association between Neo-Calvinism and the focus on economic methodology.<sup>19</sup> Tiemstra noted that “Hoksbergen puts more stress on the Kuyperean critique of and attempt to renew economic theory, and in my own literature review I argue ... that neoclassical economic theory is more the issue than capitalism itself is.”<sup>20</sup> While this particular focus may have been warranted at this time, when a narrow neoclassical theory was at its zenith, I will argue that the emphasis on economic methodology is now less important, and that Neo-Calvinist economic thought should, moving forward, reorient scholars’ energy toward a Christian analysis of the most pressing problems in economic life.

### **The Neo-Calvinist Critique of Neoclassical Economic Methodology**

The Neo-Calvinist critique of neoclassical economics has both an ethical and a methodological component. The *ethical critique* focused on the consequentialist ethics implicit in welfare economics and the resulting support for economic growth as a goal. The methodological critique focused on assumptions of rationality and the positivist divide between normative and positivist economics.<sup>21</sup> This critique, Neo-Calvinists argued, was important enough that Christians should either find a different school of economic thought—usually some kind of institutionalism<sup>22</sup>—or start to build an economic methodology with an explicitly Christian anthropology and philosophical foundation.<sup>23</sup>

A full description of the Neo-Calvinist critique is beyond the scope of this article, since different scholars in this school of thought made a variety of sustained arguments that interact with many parts of economic methodology. However, it is worthwhile to summarize some of the key points, which I will divide into three parts, each of which touch on the ethical and methodological arguments.

### **The Rejection of Positivism**

One of the primary criticisms of neoclassical economics has long been to reject philosophical positivism, a school of thought that holds that public and scientific knowledge is only gained through empirical evidence or logical proof. Some version of this philosophy has been extremely influential in the natural sciences and in economics, leading scholars to minimize the importance and validity of ethics and theology. In an influential set of lectures, A. B. Cramp names this

approach, and the separation of “positive” and “normative” economics, as one of the key failures of modern economic theory.<sup>24</sup> This argument is echoed by other Neo-Calvinist scholars and is counted by many as a cornerstone of the Kuyperian critique.<sup>25</sup> A thoughtful mainstream (positivist) economist might leave room for ethics and theology, but will contend that ethics, while important, should be done after the “positive” descriptive and analytical work is done. The core of the Kuyperian argument is that it is not possible to engage in the work of economics without first accepting some foundational ethical premises about human well-being, freedom, and the nature of human progress, and that the positivist move in economics is thus ultimately unsuccessful. In short, the disagreement centers around epistemology and public reason.

### **An Inadequate Anthropology**

A second element of the Neo-Calvinist critique is the insistence that economics be built upon a Christian anthropology. The argument here is twofold. First, economic models offer only a thin account of human motivations (rationality). Second, they argue, economics is methodologically and ideologically individualistic. Cramp argued that the strong assumption of rationality in economics had historically left little room for sin or sanctification and makes the individual preferences the yardstick against which behavior is judged. This, he thought, undermined the possibility of self-sacrifice.<sup>26</sup> While rational choice theory can be consistent with a wide variety of human motivations,<sup>27</sup> in practice, Tiemstra has noted, actual work in economics tended to assume simple, myopic, and selfish preferences.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, Neo-Calvinists prefer to start with the norms of stewardship and justice and to highlight moral and social motivations for economic action.<sup>29</sup>

One particular part of the anthropology assumed in economic theory that has drawn critique is methodological individualism. In this they echo Kuyper’s own critique of classical liberalism, which he associated with the dangerous individualism of the French revolution.<sup>30</sup> When economists see only individuals interacting in market exchange, Hoksbergen noted, they are not able to adequately examine or explain social relationships and solidarity.<sup>31</sup> It is not surprising then when economists give social interaction and solidarity less attention than other social scientists; methodological individualism has already baked in a kind of normative individualism.

## **A False Progress**

The third pillar of the Neo-Calvinist critique is a rejection of the conception of progress common in the discipline. The dominant conception of progress, they argue, idolizes individual satisfaction and material progress, and unintentionally embraces utilitarian ethics in economic analysis. The two components of economic thought that receive particular scrutiny are welfare economics and support for economic growth. The discipline of welfare economics is based on the idea that the main goal of social interaction is to increase the ability of individuals to meet their own preferences without harming others. The good of society is just some weighted aggregate of the well-being of individuals. Neo-Calvinists argued that this approach reduced human good to hedonism, and thus contained its own impoverished ethic. Human preferences could be good or bad, but fulfilling those preferences always counted the same in this theory of welfare.

Hoksbergen emphasized the ways in which the underlying assumptions of economic theory tended to be materialistic and individualistic. Even if these assumptions were intended only as an approximation of human decision-making, they resulted in economic thinking that prioritized a particular way of achieving economic ends—individual choice and market mechanisms—over any particular moral goals for the economy.<sup>32</sup> This theme appears heavily in Goudzwaard's work as well. He argues that market economies prioritize means over substantive ends.<sup>33</sup> Maximizing this limited kind of welfare, pursuing economic growth, and aiming for economic efficiency, became the default goals of economics in part because they fit neatly with the underlying minimalist framework.

Goudzwaard, in turn, ties this economic framework to an underlying idolatry of human progress, where progress is interpreted in terms of economic growth and freedom.<sup>34</sup> These counterfeit goods, he argues, are really best thought of as means to the real goods of Christian ethics. In the realm of economics, the most relevant of these are stewardship and responsibility. So while almost none of the Neo-Calvinist economists argue that freedom, growth, welfare, or efficiency are bad things, they argue that these aims are given too much attention in modern economics, and the result is a distortion of the way we think about progress.

## **Evaluating the Neo-Calvinist Critique**

This Neo-Calvinist approach to economics gained considerable attention among Christian economists, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century. As might be expected, it also was the subject of heavy criticism. The most common critique came from those Christians who simply found the reasons for rejecting neoclassical economics unconvincing. This is reflected in the work of Richardson, Klay, and Lunn, who represent the modal response of Christian



economists, most of whom are trained to do neoclassical economics and see relatively little need to reject the approach.<sup>35</sup> Others have been critical of the way in which the normative framing seems to impact the Neo-Calvinists' analysis of how the economy works.<sup>36</sup> While I will not try to adjudicate these debates here, many of which are decades past, some critiques of the Neo-Calvinist arguments offer useful advice for those of us who are interested in continuing to think about economics in the Neo-Calvinist tradition.

Oslington, for example, critiques the Neo-Calvinist work for drawing too distinct a line between Christian economics and the rest of the discipline.<sup>37</sup> By rejecting neoclassical economics and working to build an explicitly Christian approach to the discipline, he argues that Kuyperian scholars make a couple of theological errors. First, he thinks the demarcation of a separate Christian economic method misunderstands Kuyper's idea of sphere sovereignty and overstates the antithesis between a Christian worldview and competing ways of thinking. Second, he argues that this approach understates the knowledge available to secular economists, violating Kuyper's doctrine of common grace. In Oslington's reading of Kuyper and Calvin, Christian theology should be relevant, and even foundational, to economics, but Christians should be able to draw heavily from secular thinking and contribute to it as well, and the economics they practice should be a part of the larger discipline.

Oslington's critique applies well to some of the Neo-Calvinist work, particularly when the authors are offering the hardest rhetorical dichotomies between Christian thinking and the neoclassical mainstream. In practice, though, these scholars often ended up doing economics in the way that Oslington proposes. They used their theological commitments to make judgments between different schools of thought and economic tools. Tiemstra's economics textbook, for example, leans heavily on comparative advantage and gains from trade, which is a standard part of the neoclassical economic framework.<sup>38</sup> You will not, however, find any sustained treatment of welfare economics or price theory in the text. In many ways, the Neo-Calvinist calls for a separate "Christian" school of economic thought functioned as an invitation to practice economics in explicitly Christian terms, even if the ideas were almost always borrowed from other economists and social scientists operating at the time.

A second critique of the Neo-Calvinist approach to economics is that these authors inappropriately placed theological weight on unimportant methodological debates. Oslington points out that much of the Neo-Calvinist critique of formal models was based in an underlying belief that scientific models should accurately reflect reality.<sup>39</sup> Economists are more likely to adopt an instrumentalist view, in which models are judged by their predictive power. The key thing to

note is that this methodological difference need not be a theological one. The Neo-Calvinist might respond that the dominance of a particular kind of model of human behavior is dangerous, but their position need not entail the aversion to formalization and mathematics that it often included.

The biggest challenge to the Neo-Calvinist critique, however, has been a kind of obsolescence. The economics profession has changed over the last twenty to thirty years, and those changes have made many of the arguments of the Kuypereans less forceful. Three big changes are worth mentioning. First, the Neo-Calvinist economists spent most of their time interacting with formal micro and macro theory. This makes sense, given that theory had a strong defining place in the discipline at the time. However, in almost every respect, in both microeconomics and macroeconomics, theory has become steadily less important for the discipline. Instead, economists have moved strongly in an empirical direction. Even in the empirical work, moreover, research methods requiring strong theoretical restrictions or modeling have fallen out of favor, with empirical researchers moving toward atheoretical and experimental approaches. Famously, Raj Chetty, a star economist at Harvard, has developed an introductory economics course that is light on theory and heavy on data analysis.<sup>40</sup>

Second, the theories that have been in vogue in recent years have broken strongly away from the rigid rational choice framework that the Neo-Calvinists critiqued. Behavioral economics, which explicitly rejects strict economic rationality in favor of a kind of empirical psychological approach, has been both popular and productive at the highest levels of the discipline. Similarly, game theory, while doubling down on strict definitions of rationality, has incorporated a wide variety of models for human cooperation, the development of norms, and the existence of multiple equilibria. The economic theorists that are left writing today are actually doing much of what the Kuypereans asked for in the 1980s—writing about psychological biases, the development of cooperation, market power, and social learning.<sup>41</sup>

Third, the practice of economics has become far more open to the pursuit of alternative normative goals than might have been common in the past. Ironically, perhaps, figures such as Gary Becker, who brought rational choice theory to the study of discrimination, crime, the family, and education, opened the door for economists to study these topics. In doing so, economists adopted a much more varied set of economic outcomes worth studying. It is normal now to read economic literature that implicitly assumes the good of environmental preservation, child nutrition, access to public goods, decreased violence, and greater social connection.

Neo-Calvinists are not oblivious to this progress in the economics discipline. Tiemstra's 2009 plenary address to the Association of Christian Economists was about 50 percent a victory lap and 50 percent a call to further action.<sup>42</sup> He notes that heterodox economists remain marginal in the discipline, but that is partly because the mainstream has become broader, pushing those who still count themselves as dissenters further toward the periphery. This broad change in the discipline does not leave Neo-Calvinists without work to do, however. On the contrary, the need for a theologically rich economics is still important, but the way in which the tradition moves from here needs to be examined.

## **A Proposal for Kuyperian Economics**

As noted before, Kuyperian economists have had two targets for critique: (1) the dominant methodology in economics, and (2) economic institutions that violate the moral standard that these authors pull from scripture and tradition. The much stronger emphasis in North America has been on the first kind of critique.<sup>43</sup> Neo-Calvinist economics in the Netherlands has taken a slightly different path.<sup>44</sup> Kuyper himself addressed both economic methodology and economic institutions, but for Kuyper the emphasis was on the latter. As a minister and a politician, Kuyper was heavily invested in whatever questions the Church was facing in public life at that moment. This, it seems to me, is a healthy posture for Christian scholars, and it offers us a kind of course correction for Neo-Calvinist economics. In order to serve the Church better, Kuyperians should maintain their commitment to thinking theologically and thinking ethically about economic questions, but they should turn their attention more heavily toward what Kuyperians have called the "architectonic critique" of our current economic institutions.

### **Architectonic Critique**

When Kuyper took on the "social question" of his time, giving a famous 1891 address to the first Christian Social Congress in the Netherlands, he noted that the problem of poverty during the industrial revolution was a "structural" problem. By this he meant that it required of the church more than charity and more than a revival of virtue or piety. It required an "architectonic critique of human society, which leads to a desire for a different arrangement of the social order."<sup>45</sup> In this he was calling Christians to move toward the biggest social problems of his age with all of the tools that the best social science and theology had to offer. It is not enough to understand the proximate causes of a particular problem; we need to understand how social institutions and elements of our culture make that problem persist, so that it can be remedied at its source.

Goudzwaard describes Kuyper's "multilayered" approach to questions about poverty as having three parts:<sup>46</sup>

- a. Concrete social facts
- b. Structural causes
- c. Cultural and spiritual causes

Each of these levels of understanding requires that we examine a problem with a different set of questions. Taken together, they prevent some common errors and encourage a kind of transformational engagement with public life. With Kuyper's own analysis of poverty as a guide, let us take each of these layers in order.

First, the identification of concrete social facts requires an observation of a rather pressing problem. For Kuyper this meant facing the reality that "Then, just as now, defiant luxury existed alongside crying poverty, immense accumulations of capital alongside beggarly poverty."<sup>47</sup> For complex social problems, this starts with careful and responsible measurement, which can require a level of scholarly attention that warrants a lifetime of specialization. Consider, for example, the difficulty of measuring the changes in income inequality in the United States over the last century.<sup>48</sup> This is the kind of work in which empirical economists have traditionally excelled.

Second, the analysis of structural causes requires an understanding of the institutions that guide economic activity. For the study of poverty, this would entail studies of educational institutions, changes in the labor market over time, and questions about market power. The turn toward careful causal analysis in economics can be a huge help here. We know much more about the impact of minimum wage laws because economists have embraced careful quasi-experimental work.<sup>49</sup> There is a danger, however, in relying solely on narrow empirical studies. Kuyper warns us that there are structural problems that require a broad analysis of the larger institutional context in which individuals and institutions exist. It is not enough, for example, to estimate the impact of lending practices on the black-white wealth gap; we must also understand the political and social context that made a particular set of racist lending rules possible.

These first two kinds of analyses would include much of the work that is done in the social sciences, but Kuyper asks that we go deeper. He never describes a problem in merely social-scientific terms, but always also in terms of culture, worldview, and theology. The third kind of analysis, thus, asks us to dive beneath the social structures and outcomes. For example, Kuyper asked what kind of idolatry underlies the false narrative of socialism. It was not merely that socialists had too inadequate an appreciation for the price system. For Kuyper, the problem was a humanistic idolatry. He thought the socialists of his time saw all

social structures as arbitrary and optional. In doing so they rejected the structure built into creation, and ignored the organic way in which society develops.<sup>50</sup> The socialists' worldview could not be separated from their rejection of the doctrine of creation. Moreover, Kuyper also took issue with classical liberalism. He associated the liberalism of his contemporaries in Great Britain with the excesses of the French Revolution, where he saw radicals willing to throw off all social constraints in their pursuit of individual liberty. This, he thought, would leave societies without the cultural resources to push back against materialism and mammon.<sup>51</sup>

This Kuyperian approach addresses some challenges that appear in Christian work about economics. Consider, for example, the concept of “structural sin” or “social sin” that grows out of Catholic liberation theology in the late twentieth century and is also present in early twentieth-century Protestant theology.<sup>52</sup> It is important to be able to talk about laws, traditions, and institutions that are marred by sin. These kinds of structural problems cannot be reduced to individual sins and must be considered differently. It is possible for an institution that was created and developed with entirely good intentions to nevertheless reinforce or require behavior by individuals that is harmful to the good of others. In this case, the participants in said structure might appear blameless, even while participating in large-scale evil. As such, the direction of the critique must be at the institution or the social structure.<sup>53</sup> The danger inherent in the invocation of “structural sin” is that Christians can start to view sin entirely as a result of improper social structures, leaving individual moral agency aside. Nevertheless, it is also easy to place so much emphasis on individual sin and individual salvation that any concept of a structural or collective sin seems like a theological error. This might be an example of a particular soteriology crowding out the broader doctrine of creation and doctrine of the fall that would be helpful for Christians trying to understand the world.

Kuyper's own approach sought to avoid both of these errors. Kuyper saw the problem of poverty as one that required radical charity, changes in behavior, changes in laws, and an interrogation of the underlying economic structure. Moreover, he saw the problem as ultimately a spiritual problem for the Church, not just a technocratic problem for the government. This is exemplified not only in his multilayered approach but also in the kind of language he uses, which moves easily from Christian piety to abstract social science and historical narrative. The Neo-Calvinist economists studied here also avoid both errors, happily jumping between condemnations of sin on the part of individuals and businesses, while also discussing large structural changes needed in the economy.<sup>54</sup>

## **The Place of Theology, Ethics, and Neoclassical Theory**

Given Kuyper's own insistence that a proper Calvinist study of economics ought to be ethical,<sup>55</sup> what role must theology and ethics play in an architectonic critique? In order to do the kind of economics that takes idolatry and social structures seriously, we must follow earlier Neo-Calvinists in rejecting the proposition that all questions of ethics are outside of the proper study of economics. As I have argued, this kind of extreme separation has become less common in the economics profession in recent decades.

In practice, the animating concerns of those who embrace this kind of positivism are legitimate and can be addressed.<sup>56</sup> Most of the proponents of a positive-normative distinction are keen to separate the method of investigation from the final question being asked. However, we cannot make these distinctions without ethics. Doing so is merely to enforce a logical order to an argument. In an empirical study, the data and experimental design should be chosen in such a way that it would be counted as good evidence both by people who believe that one result should be true and those that believe the opposite. That is, the method of adjudication should be neutral with respect to the question that the researcher is trying to answer. This does not rule out normative arguments, in fact it forces economists to be aware of the normative commitments that are assumed in their arguments and methodology. Indeed, to do this well, we ought to be more explicit about the normative grounding of our position, which requires careful attention to ethical questions. Beyond this, Kuyperian economists should be able to adopt many of the standard methods of research in the economics discipline, whether it be in terms of data use or econometric techniques. Kuyper thought that there was some realm of measurement in scholarship that would not be subject to the antithesis,<sup>57</sup> meaning that there could be broad agreement on some basic things despite wide differences in worldview.

Theology can be particularly helpful in identifying the cultural/spiritual causes of a social problem (Goudzwaard's third layer of Kuyperian analysis). In Neo-Calvinist economics literature, theology enters in three ways. First, theology is a source of ethical norms, like stewardship and justice, that can guide economic action and allow us to evaluate states of affairs and institutions. Second, theology can offer us a Christian anthropology that helps us develop a better understanding of human behavior. Finally, Neo-Calvinists have often used theology and philosophy as a guide for how different parts of human culture should function. As an example, Kuyper's theory of "sphere sovereignty" can guide reflection about the purposes of different kinds of human institutions. There is considerable room, though, for a richer interdisciplinary approach that integrates theological thinking.

Once we move past the rejection of normative concerns in economics, much of the rest of the neoclassical economics toolkit is potentially useful. We can pursue an ethical economics that is engaged in deep structural and cultural critique, while also using the standard economic tool kit, where applicable, to better understand economic behavior. We should follow other Kuyperians by leaning toward methodological pluralism, adopting the tools and modes of analysis that seem best suited to the questions we ask. That said, if used carefully, there is no reason to utterly reject rational choice theory. Overall, Kuyperian economists could maintain a strong ethical/theological grounding and shift attention toward institutional critique while maintaining most of the theological concerns that have motivated Neo-Calvinists.

## Conclusion

Many of the best Christian scholars are already doing this kind of multilayered cultural and economic critique. The first and most obvious example is Goudzwaard's work,<sup>58</sup> which fits squarely in the center of Neo-Calvinist economics. Goudzwaard offers a sweeping account of the way in which the idea of progress has become an idol in the industrialized world, driving the kind of capitalism that disregards higher ethical values, creating a cultural and ecological crisis. It is also worth noting Wilkinson's collaboration, *Earthkeeping*, which focuses on Christian environmental thought,<sup>59</sup> and Monsma's work on technology.<sup>60</sup>

If more scholars adopted this way of doing economics, they could make good use of the specialized tools economists have developed while also engaging the work of philosophers, theologians, and scholars across other disciplines. When done well, the result is a great service to the church because it makes use of the best scholarship to understand and respond to the most pressing problems facing us. It appears to me that there are many topics that would lend themselves particularly well to this kind of analysis. There is great work waiting to be done by economists exploring social media, finance, industrial animal agriculture, climate change, government regulation, inequality, government spending and debt, higher education, health care, and likely many other topics. These are the kinds of topics that spur reflection by Christians but require considerable economic analysis to be understood well.

The impact of Neo-Calvinist theology of culture is broadly valuable. It could be an excellent foundation for more focused questions in economics, business ethics, and public policy. By offering a theologically grounded way of talking about structural problems, it could also offer some common ground between conservative and progressive Christians.

## Notes

- \* I must thank Kurt Schaefer, Steven Bouma-Prediger, Roland Hoksbergen, and Todd Steen for helpful feedback, as well as participants in the 2021 Acton Institute First Annual Academic Colloquium on Markets & Morality and participants in the Kirby Liang Centre's economics and theology hub.
1. Bob Goudzwaard, "Economics, Christianity and the Crisis: Kuyper's Heritage and Relevance Today," *Philosophia Reformata* 78, no. 2 (2013): 95–101; Roland Hoksbergen, "A Reformed Approach to Economics: The Kuyperian Tradition," *Bulletin of the Association of Christian Economists*, no. 20 (1992): 7–27; John Tiemstra, "Every Square Inch: Kuyperian Social Theory and Economics," in J. M. Dean and A. M. C. Waterman, ed., *Religion and Economics: Normative Social Theory* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 85–98; John Tiemstra, ed., *Reforming Economics: Calvinist Studies on Methods and Institutions* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990).
  2. Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 65.
  3. One translation of the quote, according to James Bratt, is "There's not a square inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ, who is Lord over all, does not exclaim, 'Mine!'" Bratt, "Why I'm Sick of 'Every Square Inch,'" *Reformed Journal: The Twelve* (blog), October 12, 2013, <https://blog.reformed-journal.com/2013/10/12/why-im-sick-of-every-square-inch/>, a Kuyper scholar, expresses some hesitance at the popularity of this quote.
  4. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace: The Kuyper Lectures for 1981 Delivered at the Free University of Amsterdam* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 3.
  5. Richard J. Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).
  6. Bruce Riley Ashford and Craig G. Bartholomew, *The Doctrine of Creation: A Constructive Kuyperian Approach* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020), 262; Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, trans. James Skillen (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1991), 29–30.
  7. Katherine Leary Alsdorf, "A Reformed Theology of Work in New York," in Matthew Kaemingk, ed., *Reformed Public Theology: A Global Vision for Life in the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 94.
  8. In this the Reformers are echoing Augustine. See Ashford and Bartholomew, *The Doctrine of Creation*, 271.
  9. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, 17–18.



10. Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*, 76.
11. See Ashford and Bartholomew, *The Doctrine of Creation*, 272; Richard J. Mouw, *Called to Holy Worldliness* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).
12. See Steven McMullen and Todd P. Steen, “Does Current Economic Theory Impose a Materialistic View of Work?,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 165–78.
13. See Dylan Pahman, “Toward a Kuyperian Political Economy: On the Relationship between Ethics and Economics,” *Faith & Economics* 67 (Fall 2016): 57–84.
14. Kuyper studied the classical liberal writers, including Smith, Malthus, and Ricardo, and was a contemporary of Mill and Marshall. It is particularly instructive to read Kuyper’s critique of these liberal thinkers because they had a large influence on the economics profession.
15. Some of his critiques of these dominant schools of political economy can be found in his address to the Social Congress, translated by James Skillen into English and published as *The Problem of Poverty* (see note 7 above). His critique of socialists appears on pages 55 and 60, liberalism on pages 44–46. A more complete translation (with all of Kuyper’s footnotes) appears in a new volume of his edited works in the Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology. See Abraham Kuyper, *On Business & Economics*, ed. Jordon J. Ballor, Melvin Flikkema, and Peter Heslam (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2021). All page numbers from Kuyper’s address in this essay come from the Skillen translation.
16. Joost Hengstmengel “The Reformation of Economic Thought Dutch Calvinist Economics, 1880–1948,” *Philosophia Reformata* 78, no. 2 (2013): 418, quoted in Pahman, “Toward a Kuyperian Political Economy,” 66.
17. See Pahman, “Toward a Kuyperian Political Economy.”
18. See Bob Goudzwaard and Roel Jongeneel, “Reformed Christian Economics,” in Paul Oslington, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*, 1st ed. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 206–23.
19. See A. B. Cramp, “Notes Toward a Critique of Secular Economic Theory” (Lectures, Institute for Christian Studies, 1975); Hoksbergen, “A Reformed Approach to Economics: The Kuyperian Tradition”; Hoksbergen, “Is There a Christian Economics?,” *Christian Scholars Review* 24, no. 2 (1994): 126–42; Alan Storkey, *Foundational Epistemologies in Consumption Theory* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1993); Tiemstra, “Every Square Inch”; Tiemstra, *Reforming Economics*. There are, of course, scholars who are clearly Neo-Calvinist whose approach to these questions is different, two good examples include John Bolt and Brian Fikkert. See John Bolt, *Economic Shalom: A Reformed Primer on Faith, Work, and Human Flourishing*

- (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library Press, 2013); Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor ... and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014); Brian Fikkert and Kelly M. Kapic, *Becoming Whole: Why the Opposite of Poverty Isn't the American Dream* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2019).
20. Tiemstra, "Every Square Inch: Kuyperian Social Theory and Economics," 88.
  21. In some cases, Vickers' macroeconomic critiques were included as well. See Douglas Vickers, *Economics and the Antagonism of Time: Time, Uncertainty, and Choice in Economic Theory*, 1st ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Douglas Vickers, *The Tyranny of the Market: A Critique of Theoretical Foundations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Douglas Vickers, *Economics and Ethics: An Introduction to Theory, Institutions, and Policy*, 1st ed. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997).
  22. Hoksbergen, "Is There a Christian Economics?"; John Tiemstra, "Christianity and Economics: A Review of the Recent Literature," *Christian Scholar's Review* 22, no. 3 (1993); John Tiemstra, "What Should Christian Economists Do? Doing Economics, But Differently," *Faith & Economics* 23 (Spring 1994): 3–8.
  23. Cramp, "Notes Toward a Critique of Secular Economic Theory"; Hoksbergen, "Is There a Christian Economics?: Some Thoughts in Light of the Rise of Postmodernism"; Tiemstra, *Reforming Economics*; Tiemstra, "What Should Christian Economists Do? Doing Economics, But Differently."
  24. See Cramp, "Notes Toward a Critique of Secular Economic Theory."
  25. Hoksbergen, "A Reformed Approach to Economics: The Kuyperian Tradition"; Hoksbergen, "Is There a Christian Economics?: Some Thoughts in Light of the Rise of Postmodernism"; Tiemstra, "Every Square Inch: Kuyperian Social Theory and Economics"; Vickers, *Economics and Ethics*. This fits nicely with Kuyper's insistence that there was a coherence to the Reformed Christian world and life view, and that the theological and ethical elements could not be separated from social analysis. See Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931); Pahman, "Toward a Kuyperian Political Economy." There is also a connection to the philosophically influential "Reformed Epistemology," which holds that some foundational propositions about God can best be considered as "properly basic" and need not to be justified with evidence in order to be rational. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).
  26. Cramp, "Notes Toward a Critique of Secular Economic Theory," 56.

27. Robin Klay, "Comment on Tiemstra," *Bulletin of the Association of Christian Economists* 23 (Spring 1994): 37–38; Robin Klay and John Lunn, "The Neoclassical Economic Model in a Postmodern World," *Christian Scholar's Review* 24, no. 4 (1994): 143–63; J. David Richardson, "Frontiers in Economics and Christian Scholarship," *Christian Scholar's Review* 17, no. 4 (1988): 381–405.
28. See Tiemstra, "Christianity and Economics," 234–35.
29. Hoksbergen, "A Reformed Approach to Economics"; Tiemstra, *Reforming Economics*, 24.
30. Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, 44.
31. Hoksbergen, "Is There a Christian Economics?," 136.
32. Hoksbergen, "Is There a Christian Economics?," 135.
33. See Bob Goudzwaard, *Idols of Our Time* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984).
34. Bob Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).
35. J. David Richardson, "Frontiers in Economics and Christian Scholarship," *Christian Scholar's Review* 17, no. 4 (1988): 381–405; idem, "What Should (Christian) Economists Do? Economics!," *Bulletin of the Association of Christian Economists* 23 (Spring 1994): 12–15; Robin Klay and John Lunn, "The Neoclassical Economic Model in a Postmodern World," *Christian Scholar's Review* 24, no. 4 (1994): 143–63.
36. J. M. Dean and A. M. C. Waterman, *Religion and Economics: Normative Social Theory* (New York: Springer Science + Business Media, 1999).
37. Paul Oslington, "The Kuyperian Dream of Reconstructing Economics on Christian Foundations," *Faith & Economics* 75 (Spring 2020): 7–36.
38. John Tiemstra, *Economics: A Developmental Approach*, 2nd ed. (Loudonville, OH: Mohican, 1999).
39. Oslington, "The Kuyperian Dream," 14.
40. A caveat here is in order. Even if light on theory, empirical work can still implicitly be based on a number of harder-to-observe assumptions which are built into the econometric techniques and measurement.
41. I pulled this list directly from the table of contents of the latest issue of *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics* 13, no. 3 (August 2021).
42. John Tiemstra, "Notes from the Revolution: Principles of a New Economics," *Faith & Economics* 54 (Fall 2009): 19–29.

43. This was borne out of a conviction that changing economic methodology was an important way to influence the larger economic system. In practice, though, these scholars often did both kinds of work. John Tiemstra, for example, focused on economic methodology in his explicitly Christian writing, but his larger body of work includes studies of government regulation, economic growth, and market accountability, among other topics. You can see both of these emphases in his book *Stories Economists Tell* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012).
44. See Goudzwaard, *Idols of Our Time*; idem, *Capitalism and Progress*. Note, as an example, the excellent collection in the special issue of *Philosophia Reformata* 78 (2013), which came out of a seminar titled, “Economics, Christianity, & the Crisis: Towards a New Architectonic Critique.”
45. Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, 51.
46. Goudzwaard, “Economics, Christianity and the Crisis,” 95–96.
47. Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, 36.
48. There has been considerable debate on the point. See, e.g., disagreements between Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, “Income Inequality in the United States, 1913–1998,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118, no. 1 (2003): 1–41; Gerald Auten and David Splinter, “Top 1 Percent Income Shares: Comparing Estimates Using Tax Data,” *AEA Papers and Proceedings* 109 (May 2019): 307–11; George Mechling, Stephen Miller, and Ron Konecny, “Do Piketty and Saez Misstate Income Inequality? Critiquing the Critiques,” *Review of Political Economy* 29, no. 1 (2017): 30–46; Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, “Trends in US Income and Wealth Inequality: Revising After the Revisionists,” NBER Working Papers, 27921 (October 2020).
49. Even though the topic of minimum wage changes is one of the most heavily-studied questions, there is still a thriving empirical literature refining our ability to understand the effects of these policies, with a number of good studies coming out in the last few years. See Brantly Callaway and Pedro H. C. Sant’Anna, “Difference-in-Differences with Multiple Time Periods,” *Journal of Econometrics* (December 2020): 200–230; Doruk Cengiz et al., “The Effect of Minimum Wages on Low-Wage Jobs,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 134, no. 3 (August 2019): 1405–54; Jeffrey Clemens and Michael R. Strain, “The Heterogeneous Effects of Large and Small Minimum Wage Changes: Evidence over the Short and Medium Run Using a Pre-Analysis Plan,” *NBER Working Papers*, 29264 (September 2021); Jonathan Meer and Jeremy West, “Effects of the Minimum Wage on Employment Dynamics,” *Journal of Human Resources* 51, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 500–522.
50. See Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, 60.
51. See Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, 40.

52. Annette Davis and Christina McRorie, “Liberation Theology and Development Economics: Unlikely Allies?” (Unpublished Manuscript, Creighton University, 2021).
53. It is also to remember that Catholic thinkers have often noted that participation in sinful structures can corrupt individuals. See Davis and McRorie, “Liberation Theology and Development Economics.”
54. I offer some examples of work that I think fit this approach in the conclusion, cited in the endnotes.
55. See Pahman, “Toward a Kuyparian Political Economy.”
56. See Steven McMullen, “Objectivity and Ethics in Economic Methodology: Dialogue with Theologians,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* XXXI (2019): 73–92.
57. See Pahman, “Toward a Kuyparian Political Economy,” 71.
58. See Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress*; idem, *Idols of Our Time*.
59. See Loren Wilkinson, ed., *Earthkeeping, Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).
60. See Stephen V. Monsma, *Responsible Technology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). Though not explicitly writing in this Neo-Calvinist tradition, you could make a good case for including Novak, Barrera, and Tanner’s work in this list as well. See Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, rev. ed. (Lanham; New York: Madison Books, 1990); Albino Barrera, *God and the Evil of Scarcity: Moral Foundations of Economic Agency* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); Kathryn Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019). There are also a large number of works that are kindred spirits, in terms of the kind of critique they offer, but they are not explicitly Christian. To choose just a few that have crossed my path recently, see Dierdre McCloskey, *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce*, 1st ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); idem, *Bourgeois Dignity: Why Economics Can’t Explain the Modern World*, illustrated ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); idem, *Bourgeois Equality: How Ideas, Not Capital or Institutions, Enriched the World*, illustrated ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Thomas Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA; London: Belknap Press, 2020); Steven McMullen, *Animals and the Economy*, Palgrave Macmillan Animal Ethics Series (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Victor Claar and Gregory Forster, *The Keynesian Revolution and Our Empty Economy: We’re All Dead* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). While these authors are ideologically quite diverse, and I do not agree with all of them, they share a desire to do economic/political analysis with a deep dive into the underlying philosophy and culture that supports a particular set of institutions.