

The Importance of the Penultimate: Reformed Social Thought and the Contemporary Critiques of the Liberal Society*

David VanDrunen
Robert B. Strimple Associate Professor of
Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics
Westminster Seminary California

I argue that the predominant approach to social thought among Reformed thinkers of the past century—what might be termed generally *Kuyperian* or *neo-Calvinist*—anticipated the contemporary critiques of the liberal society in many respects and offers considerable intellectual support for this critique, though equivocally. I also argue, however, and here is the twist that may be unexpected, that an older Reformation and post-Reformation era Reformed approach to social issues, from which twentieth-century Reformed social thought has in significant ways turned aside, may offer a rather distinct theological response to the critique of liberalism. This older approach, which appealed to categories such as natural law and the two-kingdoms doctrine, was not itself utilized at the time to defend a liberal society—such a claim would be anachronistic. What it does do is offer an intriguing and largely forgotten alternative to the current terms of debate over liberalism and its trappings; it provides a tempered and *indirect* theological defense of the liberal society. It does not dictate liberalism as *the* Christian social theory but gives many reasons to appreciate it.

Important backdrop for this article is the contemporary critique of the liberal society, particularly from theological quarters. I mean *liberal* not in the sense of ideologically leftist but in the classical sense of a free, open, tolerant, and pluralist social order. A liberal society is characterized by liberty of speech and religion, democratic participation in the political process, free markets, and the rule of law. It depends upon the idea that some sort of limited, common morality is possible in the social realm despite religious pluralism. The liberal society is an ideal that the American experiment from its inception has generally

embraced and that America and other Western nations continue to attempt to export to historically nonliberal countries around the world. It is also an ideal, however, that a number of prominent philosophers and theologians of late have subjected to trenchant critique, often in the name of a robustly orthodox Christian theology, or at least something close. These critics do not focus their attacks on abuses of liberalism or on particular freedoms or characteristics usually associated with liberalism (which one could embrace without embracing liberalism itself) but on that core, fundamental feature of liberalism, namely, the idea of a common social life built upon no shared religious or philosophical foundation.

Their critiques raise important questions and challenges to many of the various Christian theological traditions. Though I do aim to address a catholic audience, I wish to address these questions and challenges first and foremost to my own Reformed tradition, though with a definite contrarian bent. I argue that the predominant approach to social thought among Reformed thinkers of the past century—what might be termed generally *Kuyperian* or *neo-Calvinist*—anticipated the contemporary critiques of the liberal society in many respects and offers considerable intellectual support for this critique, though equivocally. I also argue, however, and here is the twist that may be unexpected, that an older Reformation and post-Reformation era Reformed approach to social issues, from which twentieth-century Reformed social thought has in significant ways turned aside, may offer a rather distinct theological response to the critique of liberalism. This older approach, which appealed to categories such as natural law and the two-kingdoms doctrine, was not itself utilized at the time to defend a liberal society—such a claim would be anachronistic. What it does do is offer an intriguing and largely forgotten alternative to the current terms of debate over liberalism and its trappings; it provides a tempered and *indirect* theological defense of the liberal society. It does not dictate liberalism as *the* Christian social theory but gives many reasons to appreciate it. This older Reformed approach, furthermore, gives reason to think that a relatively prosperous religiously pluralistic society is possible, without requiring a commitment from anybody in society to religious relativism or autonomous reason. I close this article, then, with several reflections on why Christians would do well to be critically appreciative of liberalism as the best and perhaps only social system yet developed by the human race that both is appropriate for the present age and offers serious prospects for a relatively peaceful, prosperous, and just society.

The Contemporary Critique of the Liberal Society

First, I wish to consider briefly the contemporary critique of liberalism that I refer to above. Perhaps the first major foray was the publication of philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre's *tour de force*, *After Virtue*, in 1981.¹ From a more explicitly theological perspective, Stanley Hauerwas, the proponents of radical orthodoxy (RO), and Oliver O'Donovan have offered, each in their own way, critiques of liberalism and theologically inspired alternatives that seem poised to shape debates in the years to come.

Certainly an important explanation for why MacIntyre's work has been so influential and provocative is its radical character. MacIntyre challenged not merely aspects of the reigning mode of moral inquiry in Western society but also the reigning mode itself to its core. He claims that we find ourselves in a disastrous situation in which there is no rational way to secure moral agreement or to weigh claims of rival premises. All contemporary moral argument he considers to be "rationally interminable."² In premodern concepts, MacIntyre argues, ethics was built on a view of human nature that supposed a *telos*, an end or purpose, that the human person was to seek to attain over the course of life. Corresponding to this, individual human persons were identified through their membership in a variety of social groups. With the advent of the modern period, this changed, and, by the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a new view had come to dominate. No longer was the human person understood in terms of a *telos* and membership in communities but as "an individual prior to and apart from all roles" in a *telos*-free environment.³ The "autonomous moral subject" became the working assumption of moral discourse, if it can be called moral discourse at all.⁴ Fragments of the older tradition of moral terms and rules endure, but they have lost the context for being coherent. People exchange moral claims, but such claims can never be settled because of the loss of any shared public rationale or justification for making such determinations. In MacIntyre's analysis, therefore, the liberal society emerged in the context of an intellectual and cultural disaster that has produced moral chaos and dim prospects for human flourishing. A recovery and reestablishment of some sort of premodern communitarianism is the necessary remedy.

Many similar themes can be detected in the theological work of Hauerwas, who acknowledges his debt to MacIntyre (though the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder is probably the more immediate influence upon Hauerwas's thought). In what is perhaps still his most important work, Hauerwas, too, claims that we live in a chaotic and morally fragmented world characterized,

on the one hand, by emphasis upon freedom, autonomy, and personal choice and, on the other hand, by attempts to ground the moral life apart from the contingencies of history and community. In response, Hauerwas rejects the quest for a universal, common human morality rooted in human nature, in favor of a distinctively Christian ethics narrativated in character. He argues that Christian ethics is grounded in the history of a particular people, in a narrative that forms their community and calls Christians to be faithful to their life in God's kingdom. The Christian life is therefore first of all about communal life in the church, not about the individual. Christian social ethics is not about finding common ground with unbelievers through natural law but about being the church—being a social ethic. Christians are to engage in politics by witnessing to the world about God's peaceable kingdom and by showing the insufficiency of politics based upon coercion.⁵ In the light of these basic convictions, Hauerwas, in his voluminous writings over the past couple of decades, has leveled often vitriolic critique of the idea of the liberal society and how liberalism has set the agenda for the church. A key component of this critique of liberalism is his attack on capitalism, which he claims has created an environment in which short-term commitments become the norm, thereby destroying not only the laboring class by constantly making their skills obsolete but also the ideal of lifelong relationships in marriage and family.⁶

Another voice that has emerged with some strength in recent years to join the chorus attacking the liberal society is that of RO. The origin of this movement can probably be traced to John Milbank's 1990 tome *Theology and Social Theory*, perhaps still RO's most important text. Milbank's work also acknowledges its debt to MacIntyre, though he tries to take his critique further than MacIntyre's, which he believes is too sympathetic to the tradition of ancient reason.⁷ Milbank argues that modern social theory, though purportedly built on secular, autonomous reason, is in fact a heresy, a parasite on orthodox Christianity, and is no more rationally justifiable than Christian orthodoxy itself. In his view, as well as that of several prominent disciples who have developed his thought in various directions, the idea of the secular is closely associated with classical liberalism. Both depend on ideas of autonomous reason and an atomistic, individualistic view of society.⁸ Proponents of RO have described Christian theology as the only thing capable of overcoming the present nihilism of contemporary liberal, secular society⁹ and have attempted to renew an ontological basis for cultural life grounded in a Christian Platonism. They decry the idea of a common morality or universal ethics built upon ideas such as natural law.¹⁰ Like Hauerwas, the RO movement has taken a sharply critical approach to capitalism as an aspect of liberalism. Milbank, for exam-

ple, shares Hauerwas's sentiment that capitalism undermines all long-term relationships.¹¹ A number of RO advocates treat capitalism as an all-embracing system of life, which makes capitalism an opponent of Christianity, a rival god that is antithetical to the Christian faith and devours the church.¹² Though some RO writers interested in economics reject the idea that capitalism and socialism are the only two options,¹³ others explicitly call for the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist system, albeit a Christian socialism rather than a Marxist or state socialist version.¹⁴ Generally, these RO advocates call for a specifically Christian approach to economic life and, in one account at least, for the church to be the basis for a political economy.¹⁵

Another important contemporary theological voice sounding a critique of liberalism is the more modest and tempered Oliver O'Donovan. In his elegant work, *The Desire of the Nations*, O'Donovan discusses the development of the liberal tradition from its classical origins to its late-modern manifestations. He sees liberalism rooted in a philosophical loss of confidence in the objectivity of final ends for society and a corresponding internalization of morality, which developed into a separation of theology and politics and the rejection of the possibility of resolving disputes through the pursuit of truth by persuasion.¹⁶ O'Donovan argues for a renewed theological approach to politics and for a carefully qualified recapturing of the Christendom idea. He argues that the exaltation of Christ entailed God's victory over the powers of this world who, though made subject to Christ and his kingdom, are still given limited space and authority to execute the judicial function in the present age. In principle, they have no power, but Christ's kingdom has not yet been fully manifested.¹⁷ Christendom, "the idea of a confessionally Christian government," is not a project of, but a response to, the church's mission, not a seizing of power by the church but the alien power's becoming attentive to the church.¹⁸ O'Donovan argues that the Christian state need not be coercive and should not try to protect itself against constitutional reform; rather, the Christian state may be disclosed from time to time, in anticipation of the eschatological age, but Christians may not expect that it will have the permanence of Byzantium here and now.¹⁹

These theological evaluations of liberalism, by Hauerwas, radical orthodoxy, and O'Donovan, despite their differences, share an important similarity. All of them critique liberalism in the interest of promoting an alternative social order, one that is specifically Christian in its vision and that seeks to recover or reinvent some form of Christendom.²⁰ All take their aim at liberalism from an *ultimate* perspective, critiquing it as a worldview or all-encompassing vision from the perspective of the reign of God in Christ. All desire a social order

that, in one way or another, manifests the eschatological kingdom of Christ in the here and now.

I wish now to mention one final contemporary critic of liberalism, the Roman Catholic political scientist Robert Kraynak, whose remarkable recent work, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy*, is, however, of a much different mold from the works of those figures discussed previously. At times, he sounds similar to these figures. He challenges what he sees as a rather broad contemporary Christian consensus that views modern liberal democracy as inherently compatible with Christianity and even as the natural outgrowth of Christian commitment. Kraynak counters with a historical argument that the bulk of the Christian tradition has been decidedly undemocratic and illiberal, and he adds theological considerations to show good reasons why that has been the case. Furthermore, Kraynak contends that modern liberal democracy does not have sufficient resources of its own (i.e., secular or rational) to support its most serious moral claims about human dignity but depends instead upon religion and particularly Christianity as a basis for its survival. Thus far, Kraynak seems to fit somewhere in the camp of those thinkers examined above. However, his move beyond this critique of liberal democracy is different from that of people such as Hauerwas and Milbank in a very crucial respect. While he agrees that liberal democracy ought not to be reckoned as *the* Christian social arrangement, Kraynak goes on to argue that there is in fact *no* particular social arrangement or political ideology that should be identified with Christianity. Instead, he appeals to Augustine's two-cities doctrine, and its various manifestations in prominent Christian theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin, to promote the idea that, though Christianity can provide a religious foundation for government, the ordering of society in the temporal realm of the City of Man should be based not upon the outworking of a theological, spiritual ideal, but upon prudence. In other words, the choice of one type of political system over another is to be based on prudential decisions about what means will best promote the limited ends of the temporal realm rather than upon discovering the Christian political ideal. Kraynak, in fact, makes an extended prudential argument for constitutional monarchy rather than liberal democracy as a preferred form of government.²¹

Kraynak adds a most interesting dimension to contemporary discussions. Can a Christian who is inclined to dis sever modern liberalism from Christianity recognize and critique liberalism's flaws without having to insist upon an alternative social vision that is specifically Christian and a manifestation of Christ's eschatological kingdom? Furthermore, could a Christian recognize and critique liberalism's flaws and then turn around and argue, with theological justi-

fication, that prudential considerations point to liberalism as the best option for social ordering in a fallen world? Here, I turn to the tradition of Reformed social thought to consider what resources and insights it might contribute to resolving the issues that have now been raised.

Recent Reformed Social Thought and the Contemporary Critique of Liberalism

In order to accomplish this goal, I believe it is necessary to distinguish two traditions of Reformed social thought, which, in my judgment, provide some significantly different resources for evaluating liberalism. I address the newer tradition first, which is probably traced back most helpfully to Abraham Kuyper and is commonly referred to as Kuyperian, transformationist, or neo-Calvinist. After discussing this tradition, I will turn to the older tradition, represented by John Calvin and many Reformed theologians of the first centuries of Reformed Christianity, and explore what different answers it might suggest.

To put it briefly, the Kuyperian approach to social and cultural issues in many ways anticipated the critiques offered today by the figures considered above. It has encouraged Christians to evaluate society and culture from an ultimate perspective. The Kuyperian tradition emphasizes the need to identify the principal starting points of people's thought and hence the clash of opposing worldviews that stand in antithesis to one another. Rejecting as impossible the idea of rational neutrality, this approach seeks to bring the eschatological kingdom of Christ to expression in every area of society and culture. Many in this tradition do accept freedom of religion, on principled theological grounds, but the emphasis is certainly on critique and the intellectual breakdown of the claims of modern society with a view to the Christianization of all things and, at times, the implementation of biblical models for social life, sometimes with definite antiliberal tendencies. In other words, with Kuyperianism as well as with the contemporary critics of liberalism, modern society must be judged by an ultimate biblical, Christological, eschatological, worldview-generated standard. Time does not permit a detailed study of the Kuyperian tradition here (though I do hope to provide something much more detailed in the near future), but a brief discussion of Kuyper and some of his followers may help to explain and illumine these claims.

Kuyper was a fascinating figure who was active throughout his life in the church, academy, press, and politics, affording himself an unusual opportunity to reflect on the relationship of Christian faith and public life. Fundamental to Kuyper's approach to this relation was his conviction that all knowledge flows

out of one's basic starting point: the proper starting point being that God is sovereign over all things. Yet, no one can make this affirmation apart from regeneration, an act of God whereby a depraved sinner is irresistibly enabled to believe in Christ. From this conviction, Kuyper concludes that there are two kinds of science. On the one hand is a Christian science;²² or, better, a Calvinist science that begins, through regeneration, from the conviction that Christ is sovereign. On the other hand is a non-Christian science that begins, apart from regeneration, from the conviction that humanity and the cosmos as presently constituted are in a normal condition.²³ Different worldviews emerge from these different principal starting points.²⁴ Hence arises the crucial Kuyperian concept of the *antithesis*, the radical contrast between truth and falsehood, between Christian and non-Christian principles, that, when played out, means that "school will form itself against school, system against system, worldview against worldview..."²⁵

Kuyper's approach to these issues intimately shaped his view of Western history. He was convinced that history proceeded in large part through the working out of key ideas or starting-point principles. Though he perceived noble things in earlier ages of history, Kuyper saw the Calvinist Reformation as the great turning point. It is only slight exaggeration to say that Kuyper believed Calvinism to be the fount or at least the stimulant of nearly every beneficial aspect of modern culture. He identified Calvinism as the source of constitutional liberties²⁶ and the spur of revivals in science, art, and commerce, among other things.²⁷ On the other hand, Kuyper saw subsequent European history as defined, in large part, by a series of destructive "isms" that, despite their internal differences, shared common anti-Christian presuppositions. The great enemy here was the French Revolution, which embraced and worked out the anti-Christian, atheistic position with often terrifying consistency and completely changed people's perception of life.²⁸ Among other movements following in the wake of the French Revolution were pantheism, evolutionary thought, and modernism, all of which derived from essentially unbelieving starting points.

In response to his perception that non-Christian worldviews were coming increasingly to dominate public life in the Netherlands and that genuine Christian conviction was being pushed increasingly to the fringes, Kuyper developed a grand vision for the re-Christianization of Dutch society. As part of this vision, he promoted the formation of specifically Christian/Calvinist associations in every sphere of society (e.g., Christian schools, Christian political parties, and Christian labor unions) in order to work out theory and practice from the distinctive Calvinist starting point (though he granted freedom to people of

other worldviews to do the same based upon their own starting points).²⁹ This in turn would foster the development of a “Christian society” or “Christian nation,” the idea of which did not entail official government embrace of Christianity or even a certain percentage of believers among the populace but simply that “public opinion, the general mind-set, the ruling ideas, the moral norms, the laws and customs there clearly betoken the influence of the Christian faith.”³⁰

An important, and complex, part of Kuyper’s social thought is his theology of common grace, that nonredemptive grace that allows the whole human race to continue the work of cultural development originally ordained by God in the creation mandate. This doctrine did enable Kuyper to grant a certain respect to unbelieving cultural endeavors and provided justification for cooperative efforts among people of different worldviews, such as his Calvinist political party’s temporary alliances with a Roman Catholic political party. Nevertheless, Kuyper believed that special, redemptive grace ought to leaven common grace for its better functioning. The Christian spirit must modify, transform, and Christianize the various organic connection of human life upheld by common grace.³¹ Christ, being both creator and redeemer, holds common and special grace together in a higher unity, and this ought to keep Christians from “living in two distinct circles of thought” and thereby separating religion and civil life.³² Thus, Kuyper proclaimed: “Oh, no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”³³ All of life is Christ’s kingdom. Calvinism must reject any “dualism” that threatens the standard of “religious monism” and seek to “impress the stamp of *one-ness* upon *all* human life...”³⁴

Kuyper’s approach to social life, therefore, centered around the recognition of antithetical epistemological starting points and worldviews and hence the impossibility of neutrality in the cultural realm and the need for the transformation of society through the application of Christian (Calvinist) presuppositions in every social sphere. This Kuyperian vision has been embraced by a host of disciples in the Netherlands and abroad. Close to home, Herman Dooyeweerd, a law professor and philosopher at the Free University of Amsterdam, which Kuyper founded, developed Kuyper’s thought in a distinct direction and garnered a considerable following. Dooyeweerd believed that all of temporal life has a religious root, a “ground motive” that serves as an epistemological starting-point and determines one’s worldview. The true Christian ground motive is the idea of creation-fall-redemption, while all non-Christian ground motives in one way or another cling to the autonomy of human thought.

This creates a fundamental antithesis between Christian and non-Christian thought that ought to impact both theoretical and practical life. In regard to the latter, Dooyeweerd, shortly after the Second World War, decried the Dutch National Movement, which promoted the synthesis of Christian and humanist views of life in the political realm rather than the antithesis between them through the formation of different political parties in the Netherlands. In this context, Dooyeweerd issued a resounding call for the continuing need to recognize the antithesis and felt compelled to argue that Christianity “does indeed draw a permanent dividing line of essential significance not only for one’s personal faith but for one’s whole view of society.”³⁵ This was not a new theme for Dooyeweerd. Before the war, he could also be heard lamenting “the weakening synthesis, the spirit of compromise with the world” and calling for an uncompromising affirmation of the antithesis in delineating a Christian view of the state.³⁶ For Dooyeweerd, there was no neutral sphere of life, dis severed from the kingdom of God, which is in fact the root of all societal structures. As with Kuyper, Dooyeweerd affirmed the reality of common grace and its role in curbing sin and upholding the creation ordinances, but he vehemently rejected any dualistic separation between the realms of common grace and special, redemptive grace, Christ being the religious root of both.

Another significant disciple of Kuyper is Cornelius Van Til, who impacted a rather different segment of twentieth-century Reformed Christianity than did Dooyeweerd and is of particular importance historically for my employer, Westminster Seminary California (via Van Til’s long tenure as professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia). Kuyper’s influence on Van Til is profound, and though Van Til was occasionally critical of Kuyper, it was often for his not following through his basic ideas consistently enough. Van Til taught that God knows all things comprehensively, and human beings, through divine revelation, must strive to think his thoughts after him (truly, though in a limited, finite manner).³⁷ A Christian worldview, therefore, presents a comprehensive interpretation of human experience, growing out of Christian presuppositions, without which the world has no meaning or coherence.³⁸ Hence, Van Til follows Kuyper in affirming two kinds of science—believing and unbelieving.³⁹ Though affirming general revelation from God in creation, Van Til gives Scripture the primacy and asserts that it speaks about everything, either directly or indirectly, and provides fundamental information about every academic discipline.⁴⁰ Van Til uses language that I am playing with in this lecture. From an *ultimate* perspective, he says, the importance of presuppositions and worldviews means that non-Christians are in absolute ethical antithesis to God and know nothing truly.⁴¹ Nevertheless, from

a relative perspective, they know things “after a fashion,” living off the “borrowed” or “stolen” capital of the Christian worldview because they are never able to suppress God’s truth completely nor to work out their own presuppositions consistently.⁴² The reality of this relative perspective is explained by common grace, which Van Til sees merely as preparing a field of operation for special, saving grace and as gradually diminishing over time as people, both Christians and non-Christians, become increasingly epistemologically self-conscious (i.e., living and thinking according to their presuppositions), hence depleting the commonness among them.⁴³

Van Til wrote more about these foundational matters than about their concrete application to public life.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, he established some guidelines. The cultural mandate originally given at creation belongs only to Christians. They must pursue the goal of eliminating sin comprehensively from the universe (though recognizing that they will never reach that goal in the present age), for they alone own the cultural edifice. They must not compromise the Christian ethical program. Nevertheless, due to common grace, they may engage in limited “as if” cooperation with unbelievers and put them to service in the accomplishment of the cultural mandate. At the same time, Christians ought to seek to hasten the process of differentiation between Christians and non-Christians and the diminishment of common grace by striving to make non-Christians more epistemologically self-conscious.⁴⁵

How then might the Kuyperian line of Reformed social thought lead us to evaluate the contemporary theological critiques of liberalism considered above? Clearly, there are many central aspects of the Kuyperian tradition that correspond closely to central convictions of the critics of liberalism, a point that has not been lost on some scholars.⁴⁶ For both Kuyperians and the critics, there is no religiously neutral public realm governed by autonomous reason. Both look to presuppositions and worldviews as determinative of one’s approach to society. Both assume a fundamentally critical stance toward contemporary culture and seek a specifically Christian alternative that expresses and anticipates the eschatological kingdom of God. In other words, both emphasize the evaluation of society according to an *ultimate* point of view. Accordingly, Kuyperians often seek explicitly biblical models for the transformation of society. As Hauerwas, for example, points to Christ’s Sermon on the Mount as a model for what the kingdomized culture should look like,⁴⁷ so Kuyperians have searched for their own biblical models, some pointing to the creation order,⁴⁸ others to the Mosaic law,⁴⁹ and still others to the visions of *shalom* in the Old Testament prophets.⁵⁰

Given this state of affairs, it is really no surprise that some working within the Kuyperian tradition have enthusiastically linked hands with some of the contemporary theological critics of liberalism.⁵¹ Looking at the Kuyperian tradition as a whole, however, it is probably safest to say that Kuyper and his disciples have taken mixed views of liberalism and its trappings. Kuyper himself was a champion of religious liberty and democratic government. Yet, he was also quite critical of what he perceived as abuses and excesses of unfettered capitalism.⁵² A number of Kuyperians interested in economic matters have built upon Kuyper's wariness toward capitalism and leveled sharp critiques against it, decrying its glorification of growth and progress,⁵³ lamenting its fixation upon efficiency,⁵⁴ or even sympathizing with the radical proposals of the Latin American liberation theologians.⁵⁵ It should be noted, however, that others working in Kuyperian circles have adopted a much more positive attitude toward the free market.⁵⁶ What is very important to notice, however, is that these Kuyperians are willing to embrace one or more aspects of the liberal society when they believe these aspects are biblical or defensible upon explicitly Reformed presuppositions. In other words, they may defend aspects of liberalism, but not as such; rather, as aspects that happen to coincide with elements of the social system that properly flows from biblical, Calvinist presuppositions. For example, Kuyper supported democracy and religious liberty as *Calvinist* ideas.

In light of all of this, I conclude that the Kuyperian strain of Reformed social thought, surely the dominant strain over the past century, has much common ground to find with the contemporary theological critics of liberalism. The Kuyperians may not agree with each other or with the critics of liberalism on the details of what a transformed, Christianized culture should look like, but they share the transformed, Christianized culture as a common ideal. To whatever extent these parties may find aspects of liberalism that correspond to this ideal, their basic theological convictions encourage a posture of critique and unmasking of the pretensions of liberal society, according to the ultimate standard, the kingdom of God.

Older Reformed Social Thought and the Contemporary Critique of Liberalism

I turn, then, to an older strain of Reformed social thought and reflect on how it might provide a different, less sympathetic, perspective on the contemporary theological critique of liberalism. The basic point I wish to argue here is that this older Reformed tradition provides resources for viewing society in gen-

eral, and hence also liberalism, from a *penultimate* perspective, in distinction from the *ultimate* perspective of the kingdom of God advocated by Kuyperians and contemporary critics of liberalism alike. This penultimate perspective, I hope it will be clear, is not an amoral perspective. It is a perspective satisfied, at one level, with evaluating society from a standpoint that is important, yet short of the standpoint of the eschatological kingdom. This penultimate perspective provided by the older tradition of Reformed social thought revolves around two key doctrines in particular—natural law and the two kingdoms, a set of doctrines most clearly out of favor with the more recent Kuyperian tradition of Reformed social thought, either by explicit rejection or simple neglect.

For the most part, I will limit my remarks to John Calvin, though his basic convictions were shared by many Reformed thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Calvin's approach to social questions is perhaps most helpfully and provocatively broached by means of his thought on natural law. Scholars have traded starkly different interpretations of Calvin on natural law over the past century, with some defending Calvin as an advocate of natural law and others declaring that it had no real place in the genius of his theology. Both sides, it must be granted, can cite texts in Calvin's corpus that lend weight to their assertions. Calvin at times speaks in the most negative tones about the natural knowledge of God and its inability to give any spiritually useful knowledge to unbelievers or contribute in any way to a person's attainment of salvation. At other times, however, Calvin writes with wonder about the many accomplishments of pagans who had no access to Scripture but only to the natural knowledge of God. Calvin could state, in the clearest terms, that natural law (and not the biblical Mosaic law) is the contemporary standard for civil government.

I have argued at length elsewhere that Calvin is not hopelessly inconsistent and that one set of statements about natural law should not be used to trump the other set.⁵⁷ Calvin's approach to natural law, at once both positive and negative, must be seen in the context of his doctrine of the two kingdoms. Calvin distinguished the spiritual kingdom of Christ from the civil kingdom. The spiritual kingdom is an essentially eschatological reality, the eternal heavenly realm in which Christ bestows salvation upon his elect and that finds present expression in the church. The civil kingdom, on the other hand, concerns the sustaining of the temporal affairs of this world, being governed by God not as redeemer in Christ but as creator of all. Calvin did not believe that these two kingdoms were to be absolutely separated—God is the ruler of both, after all—but he did believe that they should be most clearly distinguished, so that when one thinks about one kingdom he should call off his mind from thinking about

the other. God rules both kingdoms but does so in distinctly different ways and for different purposes. This has the most important implications for the question of natural law. From the perspective of the spiritual kingdom, natural law was next to worthless for Calvin. Natural law could never make the least contribution to a person's attaining the end of the spiritual kingdom, eternal life, because it had no power to bestow faith or lead to Christ—the hardened sinner could only pervert the natural law. From the perspective of the civil kingdom, however, natural law was of great use. Given the limited ends of the civil kingdom, such as the advancement of art and science and the maintenance of social order through law and government, natural law could provide helpful direction that even pagans could discover, sometimes with the most impressive results.

Calvin's approach surely deserves to be distinguished very clearly from the approach of the Kuyperian tradition⁵⁸ as well as from those of the contemporary theological critics of liberalism.⁵⁹ I would suggest that one crucial part of the distinction is the importance it ascribes to the *penultimate* perspective. As discussed above, the Kuyperians and contemporary critics of liberalism emphasize the critique of modern society from the *ultimate* perspective of one's religious presuppositions and worldview, judging the culture according to the standard of the eschatological kingdom of God. Calvin and the early Reformed tradition, however, while acknowledging that there most certainly is an ultimate perspective, which is of the greatest importance, also acknowledge a penultimate perspective, which is of lesser, yet still considerable, importance. Here, one can see a striking consonance with the approach of Kraynak outlined above: Society should be ordered not on the basis of a theological, spiritual ideal but according to a temporal, prudential standard.

The early Reformed tradition of social thought, therefore, provides resources for evaluating society from this penultimate perspective. Unlike the claim of the later Kuyperian Reformed tradition, civil society is not to be identified with the eschatological, spiritual kingdom of Christ. For Calvin, to associate this kingdom with the things of this world is an error of great proportions. This suggests that civil society is to be measured by a standard other than that of the eschatological kingdom. It serves different purposes—important, yet penultimate purposes, such as a measure of law and order and general cultural achievement—and so ought not to be judged by the standards of the eschatological purposes of the spiritual kingdom. Therefore, we see the importance that Calvin granted to natural law for the civil kingdom. Natural law had its limits; it could not get one to heaven, but that was not the purpose of the civil kingdom, after all. Calvin could be satisfied with looking to natural law, applied with wisdom to particular social contexts, rather than identifying a

biblical model for society, such as the Mosaic civil law. True, Calvin and the early Reformed tradition often drew normative lessons for contemporary society from the history of Old Testament Israel, and these early Reformed theologians may not always have been completely consistent. A fair reading of them, though, suggests that they saw in Old Testament Israel examples of the application of natural law at work. To put it in the words of a seventeenth-century Presbyterian confession, they viewed Old Testament Israel as normative insofar as they perceived the “general equity” of its law and practice.⁶⁰

This is not to say, however, that the ultimate perspective has no importance for questions of civil life, according to the older Reformed model. The conviction that social and cultural life belongs to the civil rather than to the spiritual kingdom implies that any pretensions of social and cultural life to transcend the boundaries of the civil kingdom are to be sharply curtailed. Were the social order to claim an exhaustive, all-embracing interpretation of life and the universe, the ultimate perspective of the spiritual kingdom shows such claims to be presumptuous and deceptive. When society and culture insists on being the eschatological kingdom—or, usually, some non-Christian perversion of a similar idea—the ultimate perspective permits and even requires critique in terms of worldview and presuppositions and how drastically such temporal manifestations fail to provide the life and salvation that mankind truly needs in Christ. Personally, I find the apologetic approach of Cornelius Van Til to be particularly effective for this sort of task.

I believe that this basic approach of the older Reformed tradition is biblically and theologically compelling. I am under no illusions that a sufficient biblical and theological defense of it can be provided in the current venue.⁶¹ Here, I can only sketch in the briefest outline how that defense might run. In Genesis 9, God established a covenant with every living creature (not just believers), concerning the temporal affairs of this life rather than eternal salvation. Through this covenant, God ordained common space for all people together, apart from particular religious conviction, to pursue the various cultural tasks of the present world. With the exception of the period of Old Testament Israel’s tenure in the Promised Land, where somewhat different rules applied, God’s people throughout biblical history (the patriarchs, the exiles in Babylon, the New Testament Christians) lived in this common cultural space together with unbelievers in as much peace and cooperation as possible. Though they remained radically distinct from the world in their faith and worship, according to the terms of the covenant of grace made with Abraham and finally culminating in the new covenant in Christ, they were to remain a part of the present world insofar as they pursued limited, temporal ends.

How does all of this relate to an evaluation of liberalism? First of all, it must be said that the early Reformed theologians never used ideas of natural law or the two kingdoms to support liberalism as a social vision. They lived within the ongoing context of Christendom, and liberalism was not a working option in the world they inhabited. Nevertheless, we may ask, how might their basic ideas suggest that we evaluate the very different world that we inhabit today, which is very much permeated by liberalism and its various legacies? First, the resources of the older Reformed tradition suggest good reason to appreciate many aspects of the contemporary theological critiques of it. When Hauerwas and others decry ways in which the values and practices of modern liberalism have taken over the church, the older Reformed tradition can only sympathize; the civil kingdom ought never set the agenda for the spiritual kingdom. When the contemporary critics attack liberal celebration of autonomous reason as an epistemological possibility, the older Reformed tradition again must sympathize; human reason was created by God, and even non-Christians without knowledge of Scripture are obliged to submit their reason to the natural law with which God himself has suffused the universe. When the contemporary critics denounce capitalism for making efficiency and progress the all-embracing norms of modern society, the older Reformed tradition once again sympathizes; no temporal economic system can provide the ultimate answers to questions and desires that only Christ and his eschatological kingdom can satisfy.

This sympathy, though, can only go so far. When the contemporary critics can only evaluate liberalism as a rival worldview and quasireligious hope, the older Reformed tradition must demur. When the contemporary critics suggest that the only real alternative for an all-encompassing liberal social order is a Christianized, kingdomized social order, the older Reformed tradition must again demur. Yes, Christians should be warned against making liberalism or any of its trappings an answer to the ultimate questions of life, but this does not mean that liberalism may not be evaluated much differently in terms of its ability to provide solutions to penultimate questions. Religious liberty, free speech, democratic politics, and free markets will get no one to heaven nor satisfy the soul's longing for God. The kingdom of Christ does not consist of such as these, but perhaps they do a relatively good job of achieving the penultimate ends of the civil kingdom, such as maintaining law and order, promoting the general advancement of art and science, and supplying the physical needs of all people. At the very least, the resources of the older Reformed tradition make such a suggestion plausible. According to this tradition, the fact that liberalism does not express the eschatological kingdom nor reflect a particular

biblical model for society is not a problem; the eschatological kingdom does not have a contemporary social expression (other than the church) nor does Scripture present a normative vision for contemporary society.⁶² The question is whether liberalism, judged by the standards of the natural moral order applied to the penultimate ends of the civil kingdom, is the best we can do during our present pilgrimage while awaiting the second coming of Christ.

Reformed Social Thought and the Evaluation of Liberalism

In this final section, I now offer considerations on how we might proceed to evaluate liberalism from a penultimate perspective. To do so, I first reflect upon that foundational characteristic of liberalism—its embrace of religious and metaphysical pluralism (i.e., not that religious and metaphysical claims are themselves relative, but that the members of society in fact hold various religious and metaphysical convictions and are allowed to do so without coercion). If that characteristic must be rejected, no more discussion seems necessary. If it receives a favorable verdict from a penultimate perspective, then a second question emerges: What do we make of where liberalism goes from its foundation in religious and metaphysical pluralism? In other words, how do its chief attributes such as the rule of law, a market economy, and democratic participation in government stand up when viewed from a penultimate perspective?

First, then, comes the question of religious and metaphysical pluralism. This critical feature of liberalism is to many people its most fundamental flaw. I counter that it may be in fact its most fundamental strength. Religious and metaphysical pluralism is at the very least a fact, a basic reality of Western society at the present moment and for many centuries past. More than that, religious and metaphysical pluralism is what Scripture suggests we should *expect* in society during this interim, inchoate period between the comings of Christ. Christians live in two kingdoms, and the civil kingdom, by God's ordination, is a mixed realm, not reserved exclusively for believers in Christ but designed for humanity as a whole in which to pursue its cultural task. The gospel of Christ has and will continue to go forward, calling sinners into the church, the spiritual kingdom, but it proceeds only amidst ongoing opposition and suffering for the Christian. Yet, in the midst of this, the common cultural task must go on. Liberalism, whether or not consciously reflecting this theological foundation, is in fact an attempt to accommodate a social system to this stubborn reality. Religious and metaphysical pluralism will not be eliminated this side of Christ's second coming, however much we may try to wish, to

preach, or to persecute it away. Liberalism, then, whatever other flaws it may have, at least has the great virtue of envisioning a way forward in cultural and social matters that attempts to deal with this reality rather than to ignore or to eliminate it. It attempts to establish a measure of social harmony and prosperity in spite of the clash of ultimate commitments among the members of society. If, in fact, God has commanded that cultural work should go forward in a religiously pluralistic setting, then it must be possible to some degree, and to deny its possibility is a lack of faith in God's word.

Of course, the critics of liberalism will object that however legitimate such an attempt may be in the abstract, in fact there is no possibility of attaining true social consensus or of engaging in real moral conversation on penultimate matters apart from consensus on more ultimate matters. Society, say critics such as MacIntyre and Hauerwas, must be grounded in a common tradition, a common story, in turn grounded in higher commitments, without which virtue and the good life are impossible. As compelling as the claims of such critics have been to many over the past few decades, there is reason to think that this objection is not true, or at least not necessarily true. A critic of the MacIntyre-Hauerwas line of thinking, Jeffrey Stout has recently mounted a powerful argument that in fact liberal democracy is itself a tradition, a substantive tradition that inculcates certain habits of reasoning and virtue. Stout, it is important to note, does not dispute the claim that a common tradition, a common story is crucial for moral dialogue and consensus. Rather, he disputes the claim that liberal democracy is not a tradition. It is a tradition that requires neither religious uniformity of its participants nor relegation of religious faith to a private sphere. A common morality is possible without a common metaphysics.⁶³ Though I cannot claim Stout as an ally on everything I will say hereafter, his work, drawn from the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism, deserves to be noted and ought to offer serious pause to those who insist that liberalism strips society of all the resources needed for genuine moral interaction.

Another reason to think that disagreement on ultimate matters does not necessarily doom all attempts to find agreement on penultimate matters is the Anglo-American common-law tradition. It is true, of course, that the common law predates by many centuries anything resembling modern liberalism, but it is also without doubt that many of the characteristics that came to be associated with liberalism (including many of our most basic civil rights and a distinctive commitment to the rule of law) were not invented out of thin air in the Enlightenment but were developed over many, many years in the common law. The common-law tradition was in fact just that, a tradition, a long tradition of ordering society through a system of justice. Yet, the common law ordered

society through a system of justice—and effectively so—by emphasis upon general principles of justice as perceived in practical cases coming before courts, not upon grand theories be they religious or metaphysical. The common law had its origin in a medieval England that was, to be sure, in some sense, religiously unified. Albeit, as a leading scholar of the common law, James Stoner has argued that the common law continued to function in the midst of significant theological upheavals in English society, first in the disputes over papal authority in the Middle Ages and then in the Reformation-era crises. Through all of this, argues Stoner, the common law “made its progress independent of religious developments—a fact brought home most strikingly by the continuity of process in the courts during the English civil war.” According to Stoner, the “traditional common-law courts had little cognizance of religious concerns” and became “a tradition of limited involvement of secular law in matters of religious concern.”⁶⁴ The common law eschewed grand theories and metaphysical visions of society—and in so doing gave us much of what we consider the best of our rights and liberties. The common law is an important precursor of liberalism not merely in its discovering many of the liberties often taken for granted today, but also in its concept of justice and the rule of law, that is, the idea that the law should set forth general rules of conduct that serve as a context for people to pursue their own goals and dreams. It did not begin with a theologically or metaphysically inspired social vision—in Stoner’s words, it did not “insist on theoretical perfection”⁶⁵—but strove to discover and develop rules of just conduct by a practical focus and on a case-by-case basis. As a character in a play has said, the English “invented personal liberty, and they know it, and they did it without any theories about it.”⁶⁶ Indeed, as Robert Conquest has argued in a simultaneously discouraging and delightful recent work, utopian dreams based upon unified visions of society have given us totalitarianism, tyranny, and terror over the past century, in marked contrast to the theoretically bashful Anglo-American approach to society.⁶⁷

All of this is to say that there are many resources in our own liberal history—in fact, some resources that predate liberalism itself—that refute the notion that religious and metaphysical pluralism means the death of tradition and of any genuine discourse and consensus on matters of morality and justice. This is not to say that there will not be times when the clash of ultimate concerns among members of a society result in irreconcilable differences on basic penultimate concerns as well. In such times, the strenuous efforts toward principled compromise and consensus may reach their limits and finally fail. In such times, witnessing to their ultimate commitments may be all that Christians

can do besides pray. Nevertheless, the prospect that such grim days may appear from time to time in human history does not strip Christians, alongside non-Christians, from their responsibility to seek peace and justice in civil society concerning penultimate affairs to whatever extent possible in the present age.

This leads then to the second concern of this concluding section: Given the context of religious and metaphysical pluralism, where does liberalism go from here and how might we evaluate it from a penultimate perspective? Where liberalism goes from here I would understand as comprising two fundamental and inseparable axioms, the rule of law and the market economy, and one non-fundamental but tangentially related and ordinarily accompanying axiom of democratic participation in political life. Here I confess myself dependent upon F. A. Hayek's concept of the character of liberalism.⁶⁸ I recognize that there are other ways to understand liberalism, but this is an understanding with deep historical roots and is the one that I wish to interact with.

By the rule of law, I understand the idea that law rather than human beings govern society, that the law, emerging in large part independently of the actions of government officials (hence the importance of common law), sets forth general rules of conduct for the members of society and constrains the actions of government. By the market economy, a corollary of the rule of law, I understand the idea that, within the bounds of general rules of just conduct, members of society are left free to produce, buy, and sell as they choose, with prices of goods established in the marketplace itself rather than by bureaucratic authority. Commitment to the rule of law, as I have explained it, virtually requires a market economy. Any attempt by the government to plan and direct an economy requires it to have a freedom to command unrestrained by a law independent of the government itself and requires the directing of the actions of members of society far beyond general rules of just conduct. Understood in this way, the rule of law and the market economy unite around the fundamental concept that there is no grand social vision setting the agenda for law and public policy; rather, general rules of just conduct (to be discovered more than created) establish a framework within which individuals and associations within society can pursue a variety of goals and aspirations in their lives—economic and otherwise. Democratic participation in government, in my judgment, is not a necessary aspect of this concept of liberalism; a constitutional monarchy, for example, is potentially consistent with the rule of law and the market economy. Nevertheless, some version of democratic government usually, and not without some degree of plausibility, accompanies an otherwise liberal society. It probably is worth saying, however, that certain concepts of the rule of the people are a direct threat to the rule of law.

How does one evaluate liberalism, then, understood in this way, from a penultimate perspective? Generally speaking, the number of concrete benefits of liberalism in the places in which it has thrived to some degree or another seems immense. Government tyranny has been drastically reduced; slavery has been abolished; poverty in anything other than a relative sense has been virtually eliminated; and life expectancy has risen dramatically. Such seemingly obvious evidence has, of course, been countered by the critics of liberalism, especially in relation to the effects of capitalism. One critic associated with RO has claimed: “Given the horrendous consequences of this discipline [i.e., of human desire according to the rule of production in the market] for the majority of humanity, it is fitting to call capitalism a form of madness.”⁶⁹ Hauerwas has faulted capitalism for any number of modern ills, including the breakdown of marriage and family relations, through its impulse toward innovation and progress.⁷⁰

In response to such critics, I note, first from an economic perspective, that the market economy has certainly never lowered anyone’s standard of living. True, there are many people in this world who live in abject poverty, lacking sufficient food, drink, clothing, and shelter. They do not, however, live in liberal societies, and whatever effects the reach of the global marketplace has had on those living in nonliberal societies, these effects have certainly not *made* anybody poor. In liberal societies, there are those who are relatively poor, of course. The liberal society with its market economy entails inequality in the distribution and enjoyment of wealth. Liberalism, though, has the advantage of being able to claim that the poor in its midst live longer and wealthier lives than did the nobility of Western society a couple of centuries ago. Claims about the deleterious effects of capitalism on the family and long-term relationships in general can be taken more seriously. We need not deny that the technological advance made possible through the market economy has put pressure on families that families have not felt in previous ages. Irregardless, whatever toll modern liberalism has taken on family life, we must also remember that high levels of infant mortality and death in childbirth, and low life expectancy in general, also took a great toll on family life, burdens that have been so greatly ameliorated through modern medicine, made possible to such a degree only in the context of liberalism and the market economy. In many ways, we must admit, the results of liberalism have been ambiguous in giving us the kinds of lives we want. With progress come drawbacks. With the benefits of the ready accessibility of inexpensive products at Wal-Mart comes the painful withering of many small family businesses through the loss of business to Wal-Mart. It should not surprise or discourage us, however, if the social progress produced

in so many respects by liberalism is not without its mitigating factors. From a penultimate perspective, we should expect no perfect solution to any problem of the present life. The fact that liberalism is not without its ambiguities is not an argument against it.

This last point, however, raises an issue with which I introduce the final points that I wish to make. We have certain ideas about how we would like our personal and economic lives to look. They can only be relatively vague, though, and, in any case, we quite simply do not know what kinds of laws and social policies would get us there or even allow us to achieve them. Modern society is too complex for that, and it is too complex for that in large part thanks to liberalism, which has ushered a relatively simple and primitive (meant nonpejoratively) society into a world exponentially more complex. It is difficult to imagine that society could have become so complex apart from liberalism or that it could remain complex apart from liberalism. Only a free market can provide the kind of information necessary to sustain a sophisticated economy. Only the classical liberal concept of the rule of law—based upon general rules of just conduct (such as those embodied historically in the common law) rather than particular commands of the sovereign aimed at attaining particular results—can be applied consistently in the midst of the intricate and unfathomable web of social relations. Liberalism seems to go hand in hand with a culturally and technologically advancing society that as such is growing more complex all the time.⁷¹

In terms of the ultimate-penultimate, two-kingdoms perspective that I have been commending, how might we evaluate liberalism in light of its seemingly inevitable connection with social complexity and technological advance? I suggest that we might evaluate liberalism positively in this regard. The standard for evaluation, remember, is not the eschatological kingdom of Christ, which no degree of social complexity or technological advance can bring in. The standard is the penultimate ends of the civil kingdom. If we go to Scripture for help in defining these penultimate ends, Genesis 9 with the establishment of the common Noahic covenant, is surely our best source. No grand social vision is set forth there, and, against the backdrop of great human depravity, that should not be surprising. Instead, God ordains the protection of one human being from the physical violence of another: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed.” Beyond this, God reminds the human race of its position as his image bearers, encompassing the interrelating responsibilities of being fruitful and multiplying and exercising dominion over the earth.⁷² How does this correspond to the ideas of liberalism? Rather well. Liberalism avoids being entrapped by a grand social vision. It looks to general

rules of just conduct aimed particularly at protecting people from the physical violence (or fraud) of others. It provides a context in which the creative, image-bearing characteristics of human beings are permitted to develop and flourish in unpredictable ways.

This last point deserves some additional brief comment. The image of God, with which human beings were endowed at creation, was badly corrupted in the fall into sin and stands in need of restoration in Christ (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). Nevertheless, God has preserved the image, however corrupted, in fallen humanity, and Genesis 9 indicates that it remains an important aspect of the common human cultural task. The implications of this are profound. The God that man was created to image is the Creator of all things, the one who brings something out of nothing, order out of disorder, as Genesis 1 proclaims. He is the sovereign, infinite ruler over creation. The human race, made to image him, is therefore made to be creative as he is. As God had exercised authority over creation, so man was to rule over creation (Gen. 1:26). As God brought something out of nothing, so man is to bring greater things out of lesser things. As God brought order out of disorder, so man is to bring greater order to that which remains disordered. God gives names to things as he creates them (Gen. 1:8, 10), and man is commanded to image him in naming the animals (Gen. 2:19–20). Finite man images the infinite God. Who can know the limits of human potential? A century ago, who could have imagined what we do and what we have accomplished today? What person or group of people, then, can imagine today what life might be in another century? By God's common, non-saving grace, sinful humanity remains commissioned to develop the potentialities of the image, whose outer limits, even for sinful image bearers, no one can identify. The image of God consists in part in knowledge (Col. 3:9). The acquisition and utilization of knowledge of this world seems boundless from a finite, human perspective, and as it has slowly increased among the members of the human race through the centuries, and exploded in unprecedented ways in the last century, man is coming to ever greater expression of the image of God, whose knowledge is indeed absolutely boundless. As every day goes by, there is less and less of the total pool of human knowledge that any one person is able to possess and, therefore, less and less of this world that any person or group of people is able to control in any rational way.

Though with great accomplishment comes great temptation, this development of the image of God through the cultivation of knowledge and the ever-increasing outflowing of human creativity must be seen as a good thing—a partial, incomplete obedience to the original creation mandate, finally futile from the ultimate perspective, that of the spiritual kingdom of Christ, which it

can never attain by its own efforts. Any system of social order, it seems, must be judged at least in large part by its ability to create and maintain the conditions under which this ongoing development of image bearing human capabilities can be cultivated. Judged by this standard, liberalism must be given high marks. As discussed above, liberalism is arguably the only social system yet imagined that provides the space for these creative human capabilities to be given such wide rein. Only liberalism, as far as we can tell, permits the kind of complex social order to develop that necessarily corresponds with the ever-greater development of the image of God in the human race as a whole. Only liberalism, with its concept of the rule of law and the market order, brings people from around the world together in peaceful and productive ways such that the tiny bits of image-bearing knowledge that each of us possesses can be brought into connection with the tiny bits of all the others so that together this pooled knowledge can burst forth in creative ways impossible to delineate ahead of time.⁷³ Yet, I am not by any means an unnuanced lover of progress. Fruitful progress can only be attained in great continuity with the wisdom of the past; what we have already attained, by virtue of its very complexity, could never be rebuilt from scratch according to a master plan were it destroyed. Progress will always, always be haunted by the gravity of the sin of the human race, which will constantly assert itself against and within the good aspects of human progress.

No, the human race will never attain the spiritual kingdom of Christ by means of its cultural endeavors. It certainly will not under a liberal system. From the ultimate perspective of Christ's kingdom, liberalism must be judged a failure. From the penultimate perspective, liberalism possesses virtues and lacks vices such as no other human system of social ordering yet imagined. Christians would do well to heed the warnings of liberalism's critics so that they never identify Christ's kingdom with the liberal order nor shape the church around the liberal model. They would also do well not to ask too much of any temporal social order and thus to remember that these critics, by not adopting a penultimate perspective as well as an ultimate perspective, have missed a large part of the point.

Notes

- * This essay was presented in somewhat condensed form as the Acton Institute's Calihan Lecture in November 2005 at Westminster Seminary California upon my receiving the 2004 Novak Award.
1. Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d ed. (1981; repr., Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).
 2. *Ibid.*, 5–6, 8, 11.
 3. *Ibid.*, 59.
 4. *Ibid.*, *After Virtue*, 77.
 5. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).
 6. For example, see Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2000), 50–51: “Capitalism thrives on short-term commitments. The ceaseless drive for innovation is but the way to undercut labor’s power by making the skills of the past irrelevant for tomorrow. Indeed, capitalism is the ultimate form of deconstruction, because how better to keep labor under control than through the scarcity produced through innovation? All the better that human relationships are ephemeral, because lasting commitments prove to be inefficient in ever-expanding markets. Against such a background the church’s commitment to maintain marriage as lifelong monogamous fidelity may well prove to be one of the most powerful tactics we have to resist capitalism.... The conservative side too often wants to have marriage and capitalism as well. I am suggesting you cannot have them both. At least, you cannot have both marriage as lifelong monogamous fidelity in which children are desired and capitalism too.”
 7. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 5.
 8. For example, see Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1–3.
 9. See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 6.
 10. See the helpful comments on this point in James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 240–41.
 11. For example, see John Milbank, “Socialism of the Gift, Socialism by Grace,” *New Blackfriars* 77 (1996): 535.
 12. For example, see Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *Liberation Theology After the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 1–2. (“Capitalism,

far from accommodating Christianity and marking the culmination of history, is actually antithetical to the faith and an obstacle to history's true end.... At the heart of my argument is the assertion that the conflict between capitalism and Christianity is nothing less than a clash of opposing technologies of desire.”) Milbank, “Socialism of the Gift,” 535. (“Capitalism of its most innate tendency precludes community. This is because [let us remind ourselves], it makes the prime purpose of society as a whole and also of individuals to be one of accumulation of abstract wealth, or of power-to-do-things in general, and rigorously subordinates any desire to do anything concrete in particular, including the formation of social relationships.”) Also see the comments in Smith, *Introducing*, 247.

13. For example, see D. Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 6.
14. For example, see Graham Ward, “Radical Orthodoxy and/as Cultural Politics,” in *Radical Orthodoxy?—A Catholic Enquiry*, ed. Laurence Paul Hemming (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2000), 103–4; and Milbank, “Socialism of the Gift” generally, especially 543 (mispaginated).
15. See Long, *Divine Economy*, 260.
16. Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8–9, 221–22. This work contains other rather extensive discussions of liberalism that display a less radical edge to his critique than that of Hauerwas and radical orthodoxy (RO); for example, see 227–31, 252–71. O’Donovan has recently continued the analysis that he began here in *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).
17. See especially O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, chapters 3–4.
18. *Ibid.*, 195.
19. *Ibid.*, 224.
20. A positive appropriation of the Christendom idea is more explicit in O’Donovan and RO. Hauerwas has gone to great lengths to attack the Christendom idea, but he himself has admitted that his target has been the specifically Constantinian manifestation of Christendom and that he in fact does uphold a vision of Christendom in his seeking a society fully integrated under Christ’s lordship; see *A Better Hope*, 44.
21. Robert P. Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in the Fallen World* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).
22. Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, trans. J. Hendrik De Vries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 181.
23. Kuyper, *Principles*, 154–55; Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 130–34; Abraham Kuyper, “Common Grace in Science,”

- in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 458.
24. Kuyper develops the idea of worldview (also referred to by *life-system* and other similar terms) in many places. Perhaps most importantly, see *Lectures*, chapter 1.
 25. Kuyper, *Principles*, 117.
 26. Abraham Kuyper, “Calvinism: Source and Stronghold of Our Constitutional Liberties,” in *Centennial Reader*, 279–317; Kuyper, *Lectures*, 40, 49, 94.
 27. Kuyper, *Lectures*, 40, 110. James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 16, summarizes Kuyper’s view of Calvinism’s effect on Western culture: “By destroying the medieval church’s tyranny . . . , it could take credit for the development of modern European civilization and its finest fruits: progressive science and emancipated art; constitutional, republican government and civil liberties; thriving agriculture, commerce, and industry; and a purified family life.” Bratt also claims, however, that Kuyper, in claiming this, facilely identified Christianity with one or another piece of European civilization and thus fell prey to the very kinds of criticisms he leveled against his opponents; see *Dutch Calvinism*, 20.
 28. Among many discussions, see Kuyper, *Lectures*, 10–11, 85–88, 151, 175–77; Kuyper, “Calvinism: Source,” 312–13 and generally; Abraham Kuyper, “Uniformity: The Curse of Modern Life,” in *Centennial Reader*, 24; Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Centennial Reader*, 470; Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, ed. James W. Skillen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 43.
 29. Kuyper, *Lectures*, 138–41; Kuyper, “The Blurring of the Boundaries,” in *Centennial Reader*, 400; Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 484–86.
 30. Kuyper, “Common Grace,” in *Centennial Reader*, 199. On the last point, see also “Common Grace,” 195: “The church as organism may even manifest itself where all personal faith is missing but where nevertheless some of the golden glow of eternal life is reflected on the ordinary facades of the great edifice of human life.”
 31. Kuyper, “Common Grace,” 188–89.
 32. See Kuyper, “Common Grace,” 171–73, 183–87.
 33. Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 488.
 34. Kuyper, *Lectures*, 53–54.
 35. Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*, trans. John Kraay (Toronto: Wedge, 1979), 2; and see also 3–4.
 36. Herman Dooyeweerd, *The Christian Idea of the State*, trans. John Kraay (Nutley, N.J.: Craig, 1968). This was originally a lecture delivered in 1936.

37. See, e.g., Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1974), 22, 24; Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977), 9–10.
38. See, for example, Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976), 38, 99; and Cornelius Van Til, *In Defense of the Faith*, vol. 3, *Christian Theistic Ethics* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 77.
39. See Van Til, *Common Grace*, 35–44. Van Til believed that Kuyper ended up ceding areas of neutrality and commonness to unbelievers in lower aspects of the natural sciences (such as measuring and counting), which Kuyper did not think were affected by sin or regeneration. Van Til even accused Kuyper of Kantian proclivities at this point. Further description of Van Til’s critique of Kuyper on the two kinds of sciences can be found in Jan van Vliet, “From Condition to State: Critical Reflections on Cornelius Van Til’s Doctrine of Common Grace,” *WTJ* 61 (1999): 76–77.
40. For example, see Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 23–25.
41. *Ibid.*, “Introduction,” 26 and 82.
42. *Ibid.*, 26–27, 82–83.
43. See generally Van Til, *Common Grace*.
44. As John Muether relates in *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist* (forthcoming, Presbyterian & Reformed), Van Til made a brief foray into explicit cultural criticism in a 1949 article in which he suggested a Calvinistic perspective on art, an unsuccessful venture that produced harsh published critiques from two of his Westminster Seminary faculty colleagues (such intrafaculty disputes being quite unusual). According to Muether, Van Til was ordinarily content to refer inquirers to *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (1959; repr., Baker: 2001), written by his nephew Henry R. Van Til and thoroughly in the Kuyperian tradition, for a helpful approach to concrete cultural concerns.
45. For example, see Van Til, *Common Grace*, 85, 95, 118–19; and Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics*, 87.
46. For example, see the relevant discussion in Guenther Haas, “Kuyper’s Legacy for Christian Ethics,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 33 (November 1998): 320–49.
47. For example, see Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 105. A similar approach to the Sermon on the Mount is evident in other ethicists’ adopting a nonviolence perspective; for example, see John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); and Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003).

48. For example, Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).
49. This is the emphasis of those associated with the small but vocal “theonomic” or “reconstructionist” movement. Among classic texts of this movement are Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Nutley, N.J.: Craig, 1973), and Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nutley, N.J.: Craig, 1973).
50. For example, Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Engaging God’s World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).
51. For example, see generally Smith, *Introducing*.
52. See generally Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*.
53. For example, see Bob Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society*, trans. Josina Van Nuis Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).
54. For example, see John P. Tiemstra, “Every Square Inch: Kuyperian Social Theory and Economics,” in *Religion and Economics: Normative Social Theory*, ed. James M. Dean and Anthony Michael C. Waterman (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), 85–98.
55. For example, see Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace*.
56. For example, see John R. Schneider (of Calvin College), *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); and, from a theonomic perspective, David Chilton, *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators: A Biblical Response to Ronald Sider* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Biblical Economics, 1981).
57. David VanDrunen, “The Context of Natural Law: John Calvin’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms” *Journal of Church and State* 46 (Summer 2004): 503–25. This article provides bibliographical material to support the claims made in the previous paragraph. I offer further suggestions for interpreting Calvin on natural law in David VanDrunen, “Medieval Natural Law and the Reformation: A Comparison of Aquinas and Calvin,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2006): 77–98.
58. For further reflections on this claim, see David VanDrunen, “The Two Kingdoms: A Reassessment of the Transformationist Calvin,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 40 (2005): 248–66.
59. O’Donovan, however, seems to understand and appreciate a two-kingdoms perspective better than most of the other critics of liberalism. Though he explicitly does not embrace this perspective as normative for the New Testament era, his practical difficulties with it are often subtle and nuanced.

60. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 19.4: “To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.”
61. Though I have made such a defense at some length in *A Biblical Case for Natural Law* (Acton Institute, 2006).
62. These words of the namesake of the Novak Award seem to express a similar sentiment: “Prematurely, before the endtime, to attempt to treat any society of this world as ‘a Christian society’ is to confound precious hope with a sad reality.” See Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), 68. Richard John Neuhaus’s observation seems appropriate at this point: “Modesty and provisionality are not the result of weak-kneed accommodationism but are required by fidelity to the claims of the gospel.” See *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 123.
63. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).
64. James R. Stoner, Jr., *Common-Law Liberty: Rethinking American Constitutionalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 60.
65. Stoner, *Common-Law Liberty*, 18.
66. From Tom Stoppard’s *The Coast of Utopia*, quoted in Robert Conquest, *The Dragons of Expectation: Reality and Delusion in the Course of History* (New York: Norton, 2005), 37.
67. Conquest, *The Dragons of Expectation*.
68. Especially as found in Friedrich A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 1, *Rules and Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); and *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 2, *The Mirage of Social Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).
69. Bell, *Liberation Theology*, 2–3.
70. For example, see Hauerwas, *A Better Hope*, chap. 3.
71. Here again I acknowledge my dependence on the thought of Hayek, especially the first two volumes of *Law, Legislation and Liberty*.
72. These claims deserve further development and explanation. For lack of space here, I again refer readers to VanDrunen, *A Biblical Case for Natural Law*.
73. This basic point (shorn of its theological reference to image bearing) is perhaps the central claim of the scholarly works of Hayek cited above. At a more popular level, the fascinating recent work of James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds*:

The Importance of the Penultimate

Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies, and Nations (New York: Doubleday, 2004), provides helpful confirmation of this point. Surowiecki argues that we attain the most knowledge through the effective pooling of the knowledge of the largest number of people, and he reflects on how this pooling of knowledge can in fact be effective in ways that I judge generally friendly to the idea of the liberal society.