

**Session I**  
**Abraham Kuyper**  
**and Reformed**  
**Social Teaching**

*Peter S. Heslam*  
*James D. Bratt*  
*James C. Kennedy*

## Prophet of a Third Way: The Shape of Kuyper's Socio- Political Vision

*Peter S. Heslam*  
*The London Institute for*  
*Contemporary Christianity*

A century after Abraham Kuyper's visit to the United States, the issue that dominated political discourse both in Northern Europe and in the United States was that of the so-called Third Way. This was reflected in a meeting that took place in Washington in the autumn of 1998 between Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, the serving governmental heads of the United Kingdom and the United States. It was a time of seemingly intractable crisis at the White House in the wake of the Monica Lewinsky affair, but the theme that pervaded the agenda of that meeting was that of a Third Way in politics, and it served to cement the Blair-Clinton relationship with bonds of solidarity. It even diverted the focus of media coverage of the United States president, which hitherto had been fixed on the unfolding scandal. Much debate ensued in the broadsheets as to what was meant by the term; was it a radical alternative to two opposing ideologies, one that bore no similarity to what it sought to replace? Or was it an amalgam of the best parts of each of them? Although Kuyper did not use the term, his sociopolitical vision was designed as a Third Way—an alternative to the ideologies of individualism, on the one hand, and collectivism, on the other.

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it will attempt to interpret Kuyper's thought, particularly as this is expressed in his Stone Lectures of 1898, within the context of his times, to shed light on his intellectual and organizational motives.<sup>1</sup> This was not a straightforward task, as Kuyper was more prone to characterize intellectual ideas by using broad brush strokes than to subject them to detailed theoretical criticism. In part, this explains why a contextual

approach to Kuyper's thought, rather than one that treats his ideas in historical and intellectual isolation, has been so slow in coming. The second objective of this paper has to do with Kuyper's legacy. Having dealt with his thought from a critical-historical perspective, an attempt will be made to highlight some of its virtues. The hope is that this will provide pointers to its relevance for today.

## Democracy

All authority of earthly governments, Kuyper declared, derived from the authority of God alone. Had sin not entered into the human experience, the organic unity of the human race would have been preserved, but as a result of the Fall, God had instituted civil authority as a way of keeping check on the potential for anarchy. The divine origin of political authority was true of all states, Kuyper insisted, whatever the form of government.<sup>2</sup>

This double assertion—that sovereignty resided in God alone, and that this held true whatever the form of government—raises the question if, and to what extent, Kuyper was in favor of democracy on point of principle. It is a question made particularly pertinent through the characterization that one sometimes encounters of Kuyper as a “Christian Democrat.”<sup>3</sup> Kuyper himself is partly responsible for this characterization, not least as a result of his visit to the United States. In a remarkable speech given in Grand Rapids on October 26, 1898 to an enthusiastic audience of around two thousand, Kuyper declared that he was a Christian Democrat and, as such, was in agreement with some of the central standpoints of the Democratic party of the United States.

In keeping with its name, the *Grand Rapids Democrat* was delighted with such an apparent display of sympathy for the Democratic cause, and carried a report on Kuyper's address under the bold headline: HE IS A DEMOCRAT.<sup>4</sup> Kuyper hastily responded by writing an article for the newspaper in which he declared his sympathies for the Republican party. In the article he explained that, although he was happy to be known in America as a “Christian Democrat,” this was not a sign of special affinity with the Democratic party of the United States—the party whose figurehead was Thomas Jefferson. On the contrary, he wrote:

We Christian, or, if you please, Calvinistic democrats in the Netherlands, were always considering the principles of the French Revolution, which Jefferson advocated, as the very target of our Calvinistic bullets.<sup>5</sup>

It was Alexander Hamilton, Jefferson's Republican opponent, Kuyper explained with an obvious show of humor, who had declared that the American evolution was as little akin to the principles of 1789 as a Puritan matron of New England was like the infidel heroine of a French novel.<sup>6</sup> The editor of the *Grand Rapids Democrat* apologized in polite tones for having inadvertently misrepresented Kuyper but added that if he [Kuyper] could study American politics for six months, he would be the hottest kind of Democrat.<sup>7</sup> This incident has more to do with Kuyper's supposed affinity to a particular political party, rather than to his position on the principle of democracy as such. However, the swiftness and firmness of his response in the American press could indicate that he harbored a deep-seated aversion to the notion of democracy.

More clarity on this issue may be expected from his editorship of *De Standaard*. In 1890, he ran a two-part series in the newspaper under the title "Democratic."<sup>8</sup> In it, he distanced himself from the charge made by Liberal and Conservative political groupings that the anti-revolutionary party (the party of which Kuyper was leader, hereafter abbreviated as ARP) was "democratic." He wrote the series, however, to protest against allegations made by his political opponents that the ARP had associations with the Social Democrats. When his newspaper expressed support for democracy, he explained, it did not mean that it advocated the abolition of class distinctions or that the populace should have the right to regulate its own laws or that it was not obliged to obey governmental authority. To advocate any of these things would be to replace God's sovereignty with that of human beings, and historic Calvinism had always insisted that a recognition of the sovereignty of God was more important than the form of government. Nevertheless, he claimed, in the history of Calvinism the word *democratic* had no "bad after-taste"—a democratic form of government was just as good as any other.<sup>9</sup> When he used the term *democratic* to describe the anti-revolutionary position, he concluded, he did so in protest against the idea that only the monied sector of the populace had the right to determine the fate of everyone else. On the contrary, no organic part of the populace should be barred from participation in government. As to the form of government in the Netherlands, the ARP supported the form that had developed in history from the time of the Dutch Republic.<sup>10</sup>

There is considerable ambiguity, therefore, as to Kuyper's position on the value of democracy as a political principle. His emphasis on the sovereignty of God, and thereby the need to obey God's laws for society, has even suggested to one scholar, Dirk Kuiper, that Kuyper had theocratic as well as

democratic leanings.<sup>11</sup> Those instances in which Kuyper does seem to advocate democracy, he insists, are driven merely by his desire to see Christians take a large enough share of power to be able to institute a form of Christian hegemony, and thus to re-Christianize society. Although Kuyper's identification of theocracy in Kuyper's thought is limited to the latter's insistence that all spheres of society should function in accordance with God's ordinances, it is nevertheless a misleading term to use with reference to Kuyper, not least because it implies that his ideas were merely reactionary, intent on salvaging as much as possible of a theocratic ideal, without positive principles of their own.<sup>12</sup> Kuyper repeatedly rejected, indeed, any suggestion that theocracy was a legitimate form of government.<sup>13</sup> Despite his reluctance to prescribe any particular form of government, he is clear that theocracy was not one of the options.<sup>14</sup> His lack of clarity regarding the desirability of democracy is unlikely, therefore, to have been caused by a longing for theocracy. More likely is that it was connected to Kuyper's relationship with his political colleague A. F. de Savornin Lohman and the conservative wing of the ARP. Lohman and his sympathizers within the ARP were uneasy about the possible consequences of the further democratization of Dutch society and advocated more aristocratic forms of government. This opposition to the extension of the franchise eventually led to their succession from the party in 1894. Kuyper, in an attempt to preserve unity following the split, and to prevent further conservative dissention, deliberately avoided proclaiming a strict allegiance to the principle of political democracy. Against this background, the *Lectures on Calvinism*, delivered only four years after the split had occurred, are resolute in their avoidance of the question of democracy.

## Authority

Kuyper's preoccupation with this issue reflects the extent to which nineteenth-century political theorists, under the influence of such thinkers as Machiavelli, Bodin, and Hobbes had come to regard sovereignty as the essential feature of the State. There is a need in any State, they claimed, for one ultimate source of universal, exclusive authority, charged to make laws and uphold good order. It is within this context that Kuyper declared in 1889 that the issue of sovereignty had become the question of supreme importance in the nineteenth century.

For Kuyper there were two political theories, in particular, that challenged the assertion of God's sovereignty in the public realm, and both were derived,

he claimed, from a modernistic worldview: popular-sovereignty, which had emerged from the ideas of the French Revolution; and State-sovereignty, which was in the process of being developed by German Idealist philosophers. Both theories were antitheistic, removing authority from God and placing it in the hands of human beings. We will take a brief look at Kuyper's criticism of these theories, beginning with popular-sovereignty.

### Popular-Sovereignty

The revolution in France, Kuyper declared, was quite unlike the three revolutions of the Calvinistic world. The Dutch Revolt, the Glorious Revolution in England, and the American Revolution had all left God's sovereignty intact. But in the French Revolution, the basis of free will was located in the individual, rather than in God, and from the individual it was passed on to "the people." Kuyper regarded this idea, expressed in the notion of social contract, "identical to atheism," and one that inevitably led to the destruction of all moral authority.<sup>15</sup>

It was the kind of individualism embodied in the political vision of Jean Jacques Rousseau that Kuyper had in mind when he issued this criticism.<sup>16</sup> This is evident in Kuyper's treatment of the social question in his speech to the Social Congress in 1891, in which he denounced the individualism of the French Revolution for undermining the organic interrelatedness of society and destroying the spiritual and moral makeup of human beings and their social relationships.<sup>17</sup> In the end, all that was left was the raw egoism of "the monotonous self-seeking individual, asserting his own self-sufficiency."<sup>18</sup>

Although, in that same speech, Marxist ideology comes under the full weight of his attack, Kuyper's criticism of individualism sounded many of the chords first struck by Karl Marx. Marx had also berated the "liberty" of revolutionary France for being little more than the freedom of individuals to pursue their egocentric interests, and for depriving human beings of their true vocation to be social and moral beings (*Gemeinwesen, Gattungswesen*).<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, Kuyper's criticism of individualism, and of its derivative popular-sovereignty, not only reflects the broad streams of contemporary European thought, it has also to be understood against the background of the liberal tradition in Dutch politics. At the heart of the political visions of the Dutch liberal statesmen J. R. Thorbecke (1798–1872) and Samuel van Houten (1837–1930), lay the same kind of individualism that had stemmed from Thomas Hobbes and John Locke and had been carried forward with great force by Rousseau and Voltaire. In fact, Van Houten, who was an exact

contemporary of Kuyper (he was born in the same year), was a leading proponent of the notion of popular-sovereignty in Dutch politics.

Against this background, it becomes clear, however, that Kuyper's attempt to associate popular-sovereignty with liberalism by linking them both to the antitheistic individualism of the French Revolution is problematic, for at least three reasons. First, it made liberalism's religious antagonism more extreme than it actually was. Although Dutch liberalism was, in general, anti-clerical, the growing strength and effectiveness of the Catholic and orthodox Protestant political lobbies tended to overexaggerate liberalism's anti-religious stance. Second, it failed to distinguish between the two broad traditions of liberalism represented, on the one hand, by Locke and Montesquieu, and on the other hand, by Voltaire and Rousseau, although, as noted earlier, Kuyper was given to impressionistic rather than to detailed criticism. This was an important omission, as it would be true to say that the Locke-Montesquieu form of liberalism was almost as sharply opposed to the continental, Voltaire-Rousseau tradition as was Kuyper and his anti-revolutionary followers. A third problem is that Kuyper failed to acknowledge where his own political theory was indebted to established liberal positions. His advocacy, for instance, of limited State authority, and his rejection of State absolutism in favor of individual and group freedom reflects important aspects of the liberal tradition. Although he inevitably sought to emphasize the Calvinistic origins of his political thought, he owed a considerable debt to certain forms of liberalism.<sup>20</sup>

### **State-Sovereignty**

When it came to his criticism of that other major stream in the politics of modernism, State-sovereignty, Kuyper was more prepared to admit to those aspects with which he agreed. He applauded, in particular, the rejection of the notion of "the people" as an aggregate of individuals bound by the mechanism of social contract, in favor of the idea that the State is a historically developed, organic whole. He firmly rejected the notion that the State is a mystical, conscious entity, possessing a sovereign will of its own. If that were the case, all sense of right and wrong would be embodied in the laws of the State, so that the law would be considered right simply because it was law.<sup>21</sup>

Although Kuyper made no explicit reference to it, his criticism of State-sovereignty was directed against the legacy of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). Hegel had taught that the individual was a dependent and subordinate part of the State, who was to venerate the State as a secular deity and as the sole standard of morality.<sup>22</sup> Kuyper heavily criticized such thinking, particularly in his rectorial address *De verflauwing der grenzen* ("Pantheism's Destruction of

Boundaries”). It involved, he maintained, the typically pantheistic removal of the distinction between God and the world—which, in the political sphere, meant the removal of the distinction between rulers and subjects: “Both are dissolved in the one all-sufficient State.”<sup>23</sup>

After receiving substantial reinterpretation and modification by Karl Marx, Hegel’s ideas found their most poignant expression in the collectivist doctrines of socialism. And it was socialism that posed itself as a mounting threat to Kuyper’s political objectives as it grew in strength and popularity toward the end of the nineteenth century. This, too, is reflected in his speech at the Social Congress, in which he criticized the collectivist tendencies both of “social democracy” and of “State socialism.” Kuyper’s objection to State-sovereignty was integral, therefore, to his criticism of socialism, and it grew bolder as socialism gained momentum.

## **Kuyper’s Third Way**

Kuyper’s Third Way between the evils of popular-sovereignty, on the one hand, and State-sovereignty, on the other, was sphere-sovereignty—or, as he called it himself, “sovereignty in the individual social spheres.” For Kuyper, society was made up of a variety of spheres, such as the family, business, science, and art. They derived their authority not from the State, which occupied a sphere of its own, but from God, to whom they were directly accountable. Each of the spheres developed spontaneously and organically, according to the powers God had given them in the first moments of creation.

Clearly Kuyper’s theory was based on an organic understanding of the nature of society. As such, it was a response not only to individualism but to the mechanism and scientism prevalent in the intellectual world at the end of the nineteenth century. In opposition to these latter two theories, which taught that society is governed by neutral forces that operate in terms of cause and effect, Kuyper argued that society should be understood as a moral organism. He appealed, in his defense, to biblical teaching on the Church as a body of many parts. But it is clear that his idea was also influenced by organicist social theories, which had their roots in German historicism and Romanticism.<sup>24</sup> J. G. Herder, an early representative of these traditions, argued that the entire nation was a single organism made up of many organic parts. After Herder, the organicist school developed in two directions, one that was conservatist and statist in the Hegelian mode, and the other, liberal and pluralistic and definitely opposed to the Hegelian view of sovereignty. The latter of these two

traditions was represented by the German historian and legal theorist Otto von Gierke (1841–1921).

The parallels between von Gierke and Kuyper are striking. Von Gierke argued, in a very similar vein to Kuyper, that State and society needed to be distinguished from each other, and that society was made up of many autonomous spheres or “associations,” such as schools, trade unions, and the church, each serving their own range of human needs and interests, free from interference by the State, and sovereign in their own sphere.<sup>25</sup> He also maintained, as did Kuyper, that the State occupied a sphere of its own which existed alongside, rather than above society, but that the supremacy of the State was evident in the fact that it had the right and duty to intervene whenever conflict arose between the spheres.<sup>26</sup> The similarities are, in fact, so close that it would be tempting to conclude that Kuyper derived his doctrine of sphere sovereignty primarily from von Gierke and his school.<sup>27</sup> A close survey of the sources does not, however, allow this conclusion to be drawn with any certainty, but the wealth of similarities does ensure that the influence on Kuyper’s thought of the liberal and pluralist strand in German organicism is beyond reasonable doubt.

## Pluralism and Pillarization

If Kuyper’s Third Way can be described as pluralist, what then is the connection between his ideas and the pattern of social organization, peculiar to the Netherlands, known as *verzuiling* (pillarization)? According to this pattern, which characterized Dutch society from about 1920 to about 1960, society was divided into vertical ideological pillars (*zulen*), rather than horizontal socioeconomic layers. In general, therefore, only the elites in each pillar were in close consultation with each other, for the purpose of government, the members of each pillar living virtually separate lives.<sup>28</sup>

To answer this question it is important to pay attention to Kuyper’s most famous and forceful exposition of sphere sovereignty, which occurred in his speech at the opening of the *Vrije Universiteit*, the Free University of Amsterdam, in 1880. This coincidence of theory and practice is of no little significance, as it highlights the fact that Kuyper’s doctrine of sphere sovereignty, which maintained the complete autonomy of the scientific sphere, was designed as a justification for the establishment of a university free from political and ecclesiastical control.

Now, the founding and development of such ideologically based institutions as the Free University is generally taken as evidence for the emergence

of *verzuiling*. It would therefore seem reasonable to assume, along with most commentators, that Kuyper's doctrine of sphere sovereignty lay at the foundation of *verzuiling*.<sup>29</sup> There is, however, no necessary theoretical connection between sphere sovereignty and *verzuiling*. Sphere sovereignty is chiefly concerned with the existence of social spheres such as the family, education, business, and the church, whereas *verzuiling* was a phenomenon involving the arrangement of ideological groupings in society, such as Catholic, Protestant, Liberal, and Socialist. Indeed, it could be argued that if Dutch society had been of a more "homogenous" nature—rather than manifesting a roughly tripartite ideological divide between Catholics, Protestants, and Humanists—sphere sovereignty would still have been practicable whereas *verzuiling* would not have been necessary.

Kuyper attached, however, a secondary meaning to his idea of sphere sovereignty. This was the notion that confessional or ideological groups in society were free to organize their own autonomous institutions. As rector of the Free University he called for orthodox Protestants to separate themselves from the rest of society to develop an independent sphere of life (*levenskring*). "We wish to retreat behind our own lines," he declared, "in order to prepare ourselves for the struggle ahead."<sup>30</sup> The argument found backing, Kuyper claimed, in those ideas of his intellectual mentor Groen van Prinsterer, that were encapsulated in the motto: "In isolation lies our strength" ("*In het isolement ligt onze kracht*").<sup>31</sup> Kuyper was prone, therefore, to use the concept of sphere (*kring*) to refer to a social group rather than a realm of human existence, and it is his use of the term *sphere* in this sense that helped to provide him with the necessary rationale for the organization of independent Calvinistic institutions such as the ARP and the Free University, which inevitably contributed to the development of *verzuiling*.

The problem is that this secondary meaning of sphere sovereignty is, in theoretical terms, incompatible with the first. Kuyper grounded his concept of sphere sovereignty, as we have seen, in the creation order—the spheres existed in God's original creation and had been invested with divine laws that governed their existence. This claim cannot hold true, it seems to me, if *sphere* is also taken to refer to confessional or ideological Dutch groupings; surely these could not have belonged to the original created order! The Dutch legal philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd was the first to highlight this problem in Kuyper's thought.<sup>32</sup> Although Dooyeweerd was a proponent of sphere sovereignty, he was critical of Kuyper's lack of precision when it came to defining what the various spheres of society actually are. Different enumerations and meanings of spheres appeared in different parts of his writings. The resulting confusion

of thought, Dooyeweerd claimed, prevented Kuyper from being able to provide a sound philosophical basis for his social and political theory.<sup>33</sup> Involving, as it did, two uses, one creational and the other socioideological, it is not unreasonable to suggest that this confusion helped to encourage the emergence of *verzuijing* as a sociopolitical phenomenon.

## Church and State

What did Kuyper's doctrine of sphere sovereignty mean when it came to the more concrete question of the relationship between Church and State? This issue—still a debate of some vitality in Great Britain and the Netherlands (not least when it comes to the marriage, or remarriage, prospects of members of their respective royal families)—was an issue of vital importance to Kuyper throughout his career, and he addressed it on numerous occasions.<sup>34</sup> Reiterating, at Princeton, the motto he had placed at the head of *De Heraut*, the religious weekly of which he was editor, Kuyper claimed that the only position that Calvinism was able to support was that of “a free church in a free State.”<sup>35</sup>

Despite such an apparently unequivocal assertion, some commentators have questioned whether Kuyper was intellectually committed to the freedom of Church and State, or whether he merely considered it the only viable option in practice. D. T. Kuiper's use of the term *theocratic* to describe Kuyper's politics, mentioned earlier in this paper, would suggest that the latter may have been the case. In addition, Leonard Verduin has argued that Kuyper saw “no principal reason for opposing the use of force” in religious matters, and that what he really wished to see was a form of Constantinian sacralism.<sup>36</sup> It is clear, however, that Kuyper argued consistently for the mutual autonomy of Church and State. He even dealt explicitly with the evils of Constantinian sacralism, both in his third Stone Lecture and in his three-volume treatise *Pro Rege*.<sup>37</sup> In both places, he emphatically denounced the idea that the State has the right and the competence to legislate on religious matters.

This did not mean, however, that Kuyper believed the government to be exempt from all responsibilities toward religion. He maintained, in fact, that the government's first obligation is an acknowledgement on the part of the magistrates that God is the source of their authority, and that they are to govern according to his ordinances. In fulfilling this duty, they were not bound to submit to the pronouncements of any church, but to their own consciences.<sup>38</sup> A Christian State could only be realized, therefore, through the subjective convictions of those in authority and not by any legislative means.

The serenity with which Kuyper formulated his ideas on this matter in Princeton belies the fierceness of the controversy in which they were forged. The Belgic Confession, to which both the Reformed (or *Gereformeerde*) churches and the anti-revolutionary party owed allegiance, conceded in its Article 36 that the civil magistracy had the right to “protect the sacred ministry” and, thus, to “remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship.” During the 1890s Kuyper repeatedly proposed that this latter phrase—to “remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship”—should be eliminated from the Article, but his proposal was bitterly opposed by his former colleague at the Free University P. J. Hoedemaker, who held to a theocratic understanding of the role of the State in matters of religion.<sup>39</sup> Although, he argued, Church and State were organizationally independent, the government was bound in its actions to the confession of the national Church. Conversely, the national Church was bound to instruct the government, where necessary, on the formulation of policy. In opposition to Kuyper, he insisted that the State could know and recognize the Church as *the Church*—as the divinely instituted revelation of the body of Christ on earth.<sup>40</sup>

Both the intensity with which he debated this issue with Hoedemaker, and the fluctuations in his position,<sup>41</sup> reflect Kuyper's attempt to reckon with the liberal domination of Dutch politics throughout most of the nineteenth century. He settled for a solution that significantly reduced the possibilities for large-scale parallelism between Church and State. His concern was to reach a synthesis between what he saw as the ideal relationship, which appears to have involved a formal attachment to God's revealed will, and the prevailing conditions of the nineteenth century—the aim being to effect the accommodation of free churches and Christian organizations, by a liberal State. It was in the interests of guaranteeing such freedom and accommodation that the ARP formally abandoned Article 36, regarding it as an anachronism that should be “interpreted historically,” having greater relevance to the Middle Ages than to the nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup>

## Appraisal of Kuyper's Vision

So far, this paper has sought to interpret the shape of Kuyper's sociopolitical vision against the background of his times, in order to shed light on his intellectual and organizational motives. In doing so, a number of weaknesses in Kuyper's position have been exposed, particularly in his explicit commitment

to the principle of democracy, in his criticism of liberalism, in the extent of his borrowing from organicist and historical-romanticist thought, and in the theoretical coherence of his doctrine of sphere sovereignty. Now it is time to mention some of the strengths of his vision, in order to appreciate more fully the contemporary relevance of his legacy.

First, the fact that there are theoretical problems in reconciling Kuyper's two uses of the term *sphere sovereignty* does not mean to say that they cannot cohere in practice. The very existence of *verzuiling* as a pattern of social organization earlier this century is indeed ample evidence that what might be called *structural pluralism* (the mutual autonomy of family, education, Church, and State) can be combined with *confessional pluralism* (the mutual autonomy of socioreligious or ideological groupings). The more recent process of depillarization (*ontzuiling*) in Dutch society raises important and painful questions about whether it is an effective form of witness to withdraw Christian energy and resources from society at large in order to organize them into hermetically sealed "pillars." It has to be borne in mind, however, that confessional pluralism emerged from the struggle to achieve freedom of religious expression. And this freedom was only attainable on the basis of structural pluralism.

Second, Kuyper's vision is well able to accommodate the social expression of religiously held worldviews. There is more recognition now than at the height of modernity that perceptions of society, the State, and education are shaped by subjectively held notions and perceptions. With this has come a growing appreciation of the fact that pre-scientific impulses take on concrete shape in the structures of human society. Living as we do in a world that is much more diverse and fragmented than the one that Kuyper inhabited, Kuyperian confessional pluralism offers a vision of how it is possible for groups of people to live together in such a way that genuine religious and philosophical differences are not only acknowledged but socially accommodated. In saying this, I am mindful of the growing political power of the Muslim community in Great Britain and its persistent calls not only for more government-funded Islamic schools but for Muslim political representation. A Kuyperian vision would seek to ensure for all such groups the free exercise of religion in society, State, and education, within a common democratic order. This ought not to be perceived as a sectarian or parochial vision. Rather, in disavowing special privileges for established groups, it is truly cosmopolitan. The rights that are conferred on one group are conferred on all others. It is, in fact, within this kind of pluralism that political liberty is more likely to sur-

vive than in most of the other social frameworks that have been on offer over the past century.

Third, Kuyper's criticism of individualism and collectivism is at least as relevant now as it was a century ago. One of the striking things about the history of Western civilization since the Enlightenment is the consistency with which various forms of either individualism or collectivism have provided the dominant social paradigm. It is equally striking that the Enlightenment denigration of communal social values still holds powerful sway in Western society. Generally speaking, citizens act largely as an aggregate of private individuals, rather than in a community of persons. They are encouraged to vote for their own set of private interests, rather than for the common good. When, therefore, Kuyper criticized individualism for making the rights and liberties of individuals of such ultimate concern that it lacked any inherent social substance, it is almost as if the former British premier Margaret Thatcher's remark that "There is no such thing as society; only the individuals that compose it" was ringing in his ears.<sup>43</sup> It must also have been with prophetic intuition that he stressed the tendency for individualism to produce collectivist forms of government, and that these forms ultimately undermine the rights of the individuals and groups they set out to protect.<sup>44</sup> The twentieth century provides us with a picture gallery displaying what happens when the will of the people transforms itself into the will of the State. In it we find the portraits of Mussolini, Hitler, Franco, Amin, Pol Pot, Milosovic, and so the list goes on.<sup>45</sup>

The present collectivist threat is coming, however, not so much from the political as from the economic sphere—which is all the more menacing because of this sphere's global pretensions. It is now not so much *statism* but *consumerism* that presents itself as the all-encompassing totalitarian principle, issuing in free-market capitalism as the dominant global ideology. The result is a world in which not only the sovereignty of the spheres of culture, family, and even the Church are under threat from private economic interest but also from the sovereignty of the State. A wealth of literature is emerging that seeks to highlight the danger that is posed to civic freedom and democracy when the business sphere is allowed to become so dominant that it interferes with the proper functioning of other spheres of society, without the restraint of the State.<sup>46</sup> It serves as a particularly striking example of the "blurring of boundaries" about which Kuyper warned. What is uncanny is the accuracy with which Kuyper foresaw its effect. In his last Stone Lecture, as he looked to future, he declared:

And the end can only be, that once more the sound principles of democracy will be banished, to make room this time not for a new aristocracy of nobler birth and higher ideals, but the coarse and overbearing kratistocracy of brutal money power.<sup>47</sup>

When Kuyper criticized popular-sovereignty and State-sovereignty he was, therefore, not only responding to Rousseauian and Hegelian philosophical influences. Alert to their wider quasi-religious ramifications, he was speaking out with foresight against the course of future developments. His emphasis on the sovereignty of the social spheres and the limitations of the State was a prophetic denunciation of the twentieth-century products of nineteenth-century individualism and collectivism. With hindsight we know what these products turned out to be: State socialism, State conservatism, national socialism, Fascism, nationalism, imperialism, neoliberalism, economism, capitalism, and consumerism. These powerful “isms” have proved able to produce totalitarian structures, not only in autocratic regimes but also in Western democracies like our own.<sup>48</sup> All this provides ample indication that, despite the great variety and complexity of recent Western social philosophy, Kuyper’s sociopolitical vision is able to provide an effective tool in developing a responsible criticism of present-day sociopolitical and economic developments.

The contemporary relevance of Kuyper’s ideas goes beyond providing the framework for criticism. Fourth, they also supply the basis for a positive alternative social paradigm that takes the freedom and integrity of the various social spheres as the basic structuring principle of societal life. At a certain level, as noted earlier in the case of Otto von Gierke, Kuyper’s vision cannot be easily distinguished from mainstream pluralist thought and, indeed, from certain aspects of current Third Way thinking, which seeks to limit the role of the State. For Kuyper, the State is not to interfere in the life of the spheres unless conflict arises between them, in which case it is to act as umpire, to restore justice. In the normal course of events it serves in an enabling capacity, facilitating the free and equitable development of each social sphere. Both Max Weber and Leonard Hobhouse came to a similarly pluralist understanding of social spheres (or “associations”),<sup>49</sup> and the British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in his pamphlet *The Third Way*, endorses the use of the State “as an enabling force, protecting effective communities and voluntary organizations and encouraging their growth.”<sup>50</sup>

Kuyper’s vision is distinctive, however, and on at least three accounts. First, he regards the norms that govern the life of the spheres as fundamental structural principles rather than as principles that provide the basis merely for

individual morality or “tagged-on” ethics. Second, for Kuyper the limited role of the State does not imply that the State adopts a liberal “neutrality.” It means, instead, that it is able to act as a positive vehicle for public justice, safeguarding the freedom and integrity of the spheres and their members. Third, Weber, Durkheim, and other pluralist-minded thinkers tended to pursue a neutral form of social science, combined with religious and ideological agnosticism. Kuyper, by contrast, took the acknowledgement of God as creator of the cosmos as the foundation for all social science. In this way, his social teaching avoids the belief—knowledge dualism that characterizes virtually all the other varieties of pluralist theory. The problem with Kuyper’s alternative—an alternative in which the sovereignty of God is a public doctrine significant for every area of society—is not so much that it has been tried and has been found wanting (to paraphrase G. K. Chesterton’s comment on Christianity), but that it has not been tried, not at least in a consistent and persistent way that takes account of contemporary circumstances. As Max Stackhouse suggests, Kuyper’s work carries implications that are wider than even his most devoted followers have recognized.<sup>51</sup>

Fifth and final, Kuyper’s view resonates with a fully trinitarian view of God. At the heart of the recent revival of trinitarian theology is an emphasis on the relational dimension of the Trinity; the persons of the Godhead are in essence *persons-in-relation*. This rediscovery has led to a renewal of theological anthropology in which it is emphasized that because human beings are made in God’s image, they are essentially relational beings. They live, as a consequence, in a plurality of social relationships, and it is within these relationships that individual personhood and identity find meaning. Kuyper’s social thought connects closely [or is entirely consistent] with this vision. At the heart of his thought lies not the human individual but the human person with the complex matrix of relationships that belong to true personhood. Hence, his stress on the group and on the organic way in which groups, or “communities,” operate and develop. He understood society as a relational entity, and his model of society is a *persons-in-relation* model.<sup>52</sup> It is this balance of the person and the community that underlies the respect that the German theologian Ernst Troeltsch displayed toward Calvinist social theory:

Calvinism has balanced the two aspects of this antinomy [of the person and the community] in a very important and powerful manner.... Indeed, the great importance of the Calvinistic social theory does not consist merely in the fact that it is one great type of Christian social doctrine; its significance is due to the fact that it is one of the great types of sociological thought in general.<sup>53</sup>

It could be added that because Kuyper's doctrine of sphere sovereignty (in the structural sense) corresponds with the way things really are in terms of the being of God and the nature of human being, Kuyper's insights are, in a sense, timeless ones that are relevant to all cultures and all times.<sup>54</sup> Certainly this suggestion is borne out by the growing cacophony of voices from different parts of the world that draw attention to the continuing significance of Kuyper's ideas for the social, political, and educational situations in those countries.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

Kuyper lived through a period that had recently witnessed the capitulation of many European states to the spirit of the Enlightenment. The shift in consciousness that this brought about was immense, and it had significant political ramifications. The preeminent feature of the new politics, and the one that most concerned Kuyper, was the exalted position that it gave to human beings as autonomous individuals. Governments were no longer perceived of as ruling by divine right, and society was no longer thought of as functioning according to inherent, God-given laws. Rather, society was perceived as a collection of individuals operating in an "open market." Gradually, toward the end of the nineteenth century and under the influence of pantheism, historicism, and socialism the idea that sovereignty is invested in the people made way for the idea that the State constituted the people and is therefore the true repository of sovereignty. The gradual shift from individualism to collectivism as the leading social paradigm was mirrored in Kuyper's attack on political modernism, which focused initially on individualism and later came to include collectivism.

It is within this context that Kuyper emerges as the prophet of a Third Way in politics. At the heart of his alternative was the notion of structural pluralism, built on the confession of God's sovereignty over the entire created order. Although Kuyper often stressed its distinctiveness, it borrowed liberally from other theories, especially from organicism and from certain forms of liberalism. It was developed primarily as a theoretical justification for the founding of independent Christian institutions, while also serving as the intellectual foundation for the anti-revolutionary party's position on the autonomy of Church and State. Most important, it provided the rationale for social and political pluralism, which was Kuyper's answer to the liberal domination of politics. Insofar as this pluralism coincided with Kuyper's notion of religious or ideological pluralism, it helped to lay the basis for the development of

*verzuijing*, which came about chiefly as a result of the sweeping social changes that had reached full momentum in the Netherlands by the end of the nineteenth century.

Kuyper's vision of a pluralist society provides a coherent, credible, and distinct alternative, based on an understanding of society as comprising spheres that possess their own inner coherence. Despite the distrust of meta-narratives characteristic of contemporary postmodern culture, an increasing number of informed and intelligent voices are keen to explore the relevance of Kuyper's sociopolitical vision within what amounts to a naked public square, devoid of meaningful alternatives. The challenge is not to import Kuyper's particular kind of pillarization into our societies but to develop a new form of public pluralism that will both resist the totalitarianism of the consumerist ethic and ensure that our laws and public policies support the freedom and autonomy of each of the social spheres and of each of our worldview communities. This is a third way that may not catch the attention of the media and so bring momentary relief to a beleaguered United States president. But it will, at least, be one step toward the kingdoms of this world becoming the kingdoms of our God.

## Notes

1. In my book on the Stone Lectures, on which this paper draws, I argue that these lectures, delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary, represent a summary of Kuyper's thought at the high point of his career. See Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 9–11.
2. See Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism: Six Lectures Delivered at Princeton University Under the Auspices of the L. P. Stone Foundation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 82–83. Reprinted in 1978, 1983, 1987, and 1998. Abbreviated to "LC" in this paper.
3. See, for instance, Harry Van Dyke, "How Kuyper Became a Christian Democrat," *Calvin Theological Journal* 33 (1998): 420–35.
4. *Grand Rapids Democrat*, October 27, 1898.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Kuyper had cited these words on Hamilton a couple of weeks earlier in his Stone Lectures at Princeton. There he added a quote from Hamilton's correspondence, cited in Cabot Lodge's *Alexander Hamilton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892),

which he had consulted en route across the Atlantic: “There is no real resemblance between what was the cause of the America and the cause of France” (*LC*, 87). *Alexander Hamilton*, 256.

7. Peter S. Heslam, *Grand Rapids Democrat*, October 29, 1898.
8. *De Standaard*, 7 and 10 March 1890.
9. *Ibid.*, 10 March 1890.
10. *Ibid.* See also Article 6 of the anti-revolutionary manifesto, in A. Kuiper, *Ons Program*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: Kruyt, 1879), 2.
11. D. T. Kuiper “The Historical and Sociological Development of the ARP and CDA,” in *Christian Political Options* (The Hague: AR-Partijstichting, 1979), 10–32, especially 19. See also D. T. Kuiper, “Theory and Practice in Dutch Calvinism,” 70–72.
12. *Ibid.*, 30.
13. See, for instance, Kuiper’s *Ons Program*, 46; *LC*, 85; *Antirevolutionaire staatkunde: met nadere toelichting op “Ons Program”* (Kampen: Kok, 1916), I, 273–74.
14. James Skillen suggests that the evidence from Kuiper’s own political involvement indicates that he was a staunch supporter of democratic representative institutions in government on the basis of social, ideological, and political pluralism. Skillen, “The Development of Calvinistic Political Theory,” 255. See also G. J. Spykman, “Pluralism: Our Last Best Hope?” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 10 (1981): 99–115.
15. See *LC*, 87–88, and Kuiper’s “Calvinism: Origin and Safeguard of Our Constitutional Liberties,” trans. J. H. de Vries, *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July and October 1895): 385–410, 645–74, especially 662.
16. Rousseau’s work also contained statist and collectivist themes, alongside individualistic ones.
17. A. Kuiper, *The Problem of Poverty*, a translation of the opening address at the First Christian Social Congress in the Netherlands, November 9, 1891. Edited and introduced by James W. Skillen (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 44.
18. Kuiper, *The Problem of Poverty*, 44.
19. Although there is no direct evidence that Kuiper’s criticism of individualism was indebted to Marx, he was closely acquainted with Marx’s work. See Kuiper’s *Het Sociale Vraagstuk en de christelijke religie* (Amsterdam: Wormser, 1891), 64, fn. 57; *Briefwisseling van Mr. G. Groen van Prinsterer met Dr. A. Kuiper, 1864–1876*, ed. A. Goslinga (Kampen: Kok, 1937), 290.

20. Kuyper's principal debt was, of course, to the Locke-Montesquieu tradition, but he was also influenced by Edmund Burke. Kuyper refused to regard the philosophy of the Whigs as liberal, insisting instead that its origins lay in English Puritanism. See Kuyper, "Calvinism: The Origin and Safeguard," 395, 677, 673–74.
21. *LC*, 89
22. G. W. F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, 4th ed., ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1955), 278–88.
23. A. Kuyper, *Pantheism's Destruction of Boundaries* (1893), 26. This pamphlet was reprinted from an article with the same title in *Methodist Review* 75 (1893): 520–37, 762–78.
24. The influence of historicist thought on Kuyper's social theory has been suggested in the following studies but has yet to be analyzed in depth: J. D. Dengerink, *Critisch-historisch onderzoek naar de sociologische ontwikkeling van het beginsel der "Sovereiniteit in Eigen Kring" in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw* (Kampen: Kok, 1948), 150–52; J. van Weringh, *Het maatschappijbeeld van Abraham Kuyper* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1967), 158–87; D. T. Kuiper and H. E. S. Woldring, *Reformatorsche maatschappijkritiek: ontwikkelingen op het gebied van sociale filosofie en sociologie in de kring van het nederlandse protestantisme van de negentiende eeuw tot heden* (Kampen: Kok, 1980), 56–66.
25. Otto von Gierke, *Community in Historical Perspective*, trans. Mary Fischer, ed. Antony Black (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). This work consists largely of extracts from the first volume of von Gierke's *Das Deutsche Genossenschaftsrecht*.
26. See the extract from von Gierke's *Community* in James W. Skillen and Rocke M. McCartney, eds., *Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 79–96.
27. Groen van Prinsterer's belief in the organic nature of society is also, of course, an important part of the background to Kuyper's view.
28. In recent decades the system of *verzuiling* as a politico-social phenomenon has attracted international attention from a large number of social and political scientists. See, for example A. Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands*, 2d ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); H. Daalder, "Consociationalism, Centre, and Periphery in the Netherlands," in *Mobilization, Center-Periphery Structures and Nation-Building*, ed. P. Torsvik (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1981), 181–240; Siep Stuurman, *Verzuiling, kapitalisme en patriërchaat: aspecten van de ontwikkeling van de moderne staat in Nederland* (Nijmegen: Socialistische Uitgeverij, 1983); *Consociationalism, Pillarization, and Conflict-Management in the Low Countries*,

- ed. M. P. C. M. van Schendelen (published as a special-theme edition of *Acta Politica* [1984/I]); Michael Wintle, *Pillars of Piety: Religion in the Netherlands in the Nineteenth Century, 1813–1901* (Hull: Hull University Press, 1987); Peter van Rooden, *Religieuze regimes: Over godsdienst en maatschappij in Nederland, 1950–1990* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1996).
29. A good deal of commentators assume that because Kuyper's social effect can be explained in terms of *verzuiling*, it was a mode of social organization that he himself advocated. See, for instance, E. H. Kossman, *The Low Countries, 1790–1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 304.
  30. A. Kuyper, *De verflauwing der grenzen: rede bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Vrije Universiteit, oktober 1892* (Amsterdam: Wormser, 1892), 47.
  31. *Ibid.*, 37.
  32. H. Dooyeweerd, "Introduction," in *The Idea of a Christian Philosophy: Essays in Honour of D. H. T. Vollenhoven* (Toronto: Wedge, 1973). Published simultaneously in *Philosophia Reformata: orgaan van de vereniging voor calvinistische wijsbegeerte* 38 (1973), 7.
  33. H. Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular and Christian Options*, trans. John Kraay (Toronto: Wedge, 1979), 54.
  34. More than half of the third volume of Kuyper's *De gemeene gratie* (Amsterdam: Hoveker & Wormser, 1899) is devoted to this issue.
  35. *LC*, 99, 106.
  36. Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 79.
  37. A. Kuyper, *Pro Rege of het Koningschap van Christus* (Kampen: Kok, 1911–1912), III, 301–2.
  38. *LC*, 103.
  39. Hoedemaker's theocratic position, which led to his resignation at the Free University in 1887. He subsequently severed his connection with Kuyper and the ARP and became an instrumental figure in the early development of the more conservatively inclined Christian Historical Union. For detailed discussions of the conflict between Hoedemaker and Kuyper, see G. J. J. A. Delfgaauw, *De staatsleer van Hoedemaker: een bijdrage tot de kennis van de christelijk-historische staatsopvatting* (Kok: Kampen, 1963), 132–41; H. van Spanning, "Hoedemaker en de anti-revolutionairen," in *Hoedemaker herdacht*, ed. G. Abma and J. de Bruijn (Baarn: Ten Have, 1989), 234–45.
  40. P. J. Hoedemaker, *Artikel 36 onzer Nederduitse geloofsbelijdenis tegenover Dr. A. Kuyper gehandhaafd* (Amsterdam: Van Dam, 1901).

41. For the development of Kuyper's position, see *Creating a Christian Worldview*, 163–64.
42. A. Kuyper, *De gemeene gratie*, III, 288–89. In 1905 the synod of the *Gereformeerde* churches abandoned the phrase in Article 36, which prescribed that the government was to eliminate false religion. Those that did agree to this found it difficult to remain within the main body of the *Gereformeerde* churches and of the ARP (see Meyer, 264).
43. This comment is made advisedly, with due recognition to the context of Thatcher's remarks. In his response to these remarks, the former British Liberal Party leader Sir David Steel writes, "Her individualist vision of human identity is a grave distortion of the biblical view of humanity, where individual human personhood is found only in dependent relationship with God and other people." In Foreword to William Storrar, *Scottish Identity: A Christian Vision* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1990).
44. Dooyeweerd would have agreed with Kuyper's assertion that individualism and collectivism both stem from the same root. Dooyeweerd wrote: "The point is not to find a suitable middle road between individualism and collectivism, but to recognize the false root from which both spring forth." See Dooyeweerd's "Individu, gemeenschap, eigendom," in *Verkenningen: Christelijke Perspectief* (Amsterdam: Buijten and Schipperheijn, 1962): 210–11.
45. Elaine Storkey, "Sphere Sovereignty and the Anglo-American Tradition," *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Luis E. Lugo (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 189–201, especially 191.
46. See, for instance, David C. Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (London: Earthscan, 1995); John Madeley, *Big Business, Poor Peoples: The Impact of Transnational Corporations on the World's Poor* (London: Zed Books, 1999); Bob Goudzwaard, "Globalization, Regionalism and Sphere Sovereignty," in Lugo, *Religion, Pluralism and Public Life*, 325–41, especially 325, 335–36; Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Democracy* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2000); George Monbiot, *Captive State: The Corporate Takeover of Britain* (London: Macmillan, 2000); Noreena Hertz, *The Silent Takeover: Global Capitalism and the Death of Democracy* (London: William Heinemann, 2001).
47. *LC*, 179–80.
48. Storkey, "Sphere Sovereignty," 194.

49. See Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); L. T. Hobhouse, *Morals in Evolution* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1951); and Storkey, "Sphere Sovereignty," 191.
50. Tony Blair, *The Third Way: New Politics for the New Century* (London: The Fabian Society, 1998), 4. The same notion can be found in what Tony Blair identifies as the four broad policy objectives of the Third Way (7):
  1. A dynamic knowledge-based economy founded on individual empowerment and opportunity, where governments enable, not command, and the power of the market is harnessed to serve the public interest;
  2. A strong civil society enshrining rights and responsibilities, where the government is a partner to strong communities;
  3. A modern government based on partnership and decentralization, where democracy is deepened to suit the modern age;
  4. And a foreign policy based on international cooperation.
51. See Max Stackhouse's "Preface" to *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life*, xv. Stackhouse proposes that Kuyper's thought be retrieved, revised, and made a live option for the future. He even suggests that a renaissance of Kuyperian thought may well be underway (xv–xvi).
52. As early as the 1960s the sociologist Leonard Boonin outlined three basic structural models of society: the "atomistic" model, which corresponds to Kuyper's characterization of individualism; the "organic" or "holistic" model, which corresponds to Kuyper's depiction of collectivism, and the "persons-in-relation" model. According to this third model, what is real, Boonin writes, "is neither the abstract individual of the atomistic model, nor the concrete society of the organic model. What is real is persons-in-relation." Leonard Boonin, "Man and Society: An Examination of Three Models," in *Voluntary Associations*, ed. J. R. Pennock and J. W. Chapman (New York: Atherton Press, 1969), 69–77, especially 77. Cited in Rockne McCarthy et al., *Society, State and Schools: A Case for Structural and Confessional Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 14.
53. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1931), II, 621.
54. Storkey, "Sphere Sovereignty," 189; James Skillen, "Why Kuyper Now?," in *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life*, 368.
55. At the Kuyper commemorative conferences that were held in Princeton, Amsterdam, and Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1998, papers were presented by a number of speakers from outside the Kuyperian dominions of the Netherlands and the United States. In these it was argued that Kuyper's ideas—not least, his doctrine of sphere sovereignty—were of vital and overriding significance to situations as far removed from the Netherlands and Dutch America as Japan, Great Britain, Korea, and Hungary. Some of these papers have been published in the volumes

Prophet of a Third Way: The Shape  
of Kuyper's Socio-Political Vision

that have so far ensued from these conferences: *Kuyper Reconsidered: Aspects of His Life and Work*, eds. Cornelius van der Kooi and Jan de Bruijn (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1999); and *Religion, Pluralism and Public Life*. On Kuyper's perceived significance for India, see Vishal Mangalwadi's introduction to Kuyper's Stone Lectures in Abraham Kuyper, *The Crown of Christian Heritage: Six Lectures Delivered at Princeton University Under Auspices of the L. P. Stone Foundation* (Landour, Mussoorie: Nivedit Good Books, 1994).