

Passionate About the Poor: The Social Attitudes of Abraham Kuyper

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Peter Heslam has provided a fine synopsis of the leading themes in Abraham Kuyper's political thought. Kuyper's positive commitments to divine sovereignty and sphere sovereignty, his sharp distinction between State and society, his value-charged rhetoric of "organic" and "mechanical," and his suspicions of both popular- and State-sovereignty are the coin of this particular realm, and Heslam has assayed their value efficiently and accurately. He has also given some attention to the origins of these concepts and to the contexts in which Kuyper deployed them. I have two questions to raise concerning Heslam's account, one of them more modest, the other more fundamental, the answers to which will lead back to my principal concern, the issue of context. More particularly, I would like to reflect on what might be called the emotional context of Kuyper's ideas, the passions behind the principles.

First of all, the more fundamental question, if we take philosophical-theological principles to be fundamental with Kuyper. On this score, I think that what Heslam designates as the primary and secondary meanings of the sphere sovereignty concept are not quite so "incompatible" as he contends.¹ "Spheres" as "realms of human existence," he rightly claims, emanate for Kuyper from "God's original creation," but socio-ideological "circles" or "confessional groupings" could not have arisen there. True enough. Confessional groupings in Kuyper's system proceed instead from the work of redemption over time by way of covenant and election. That Kuyper pinned the same terminology to both sorts of entities might be semantically confusing, as Heslam argues, but it is not logically contradictory unless one wishes to

disconnect the two theological planes. Perhaps that was Herman Dooyeweerd's intent in driving for a creational ontology, but it was not Kuyper's in his twofold program for mobilizing his followers: that is, to warrant earthly existence as creationally good, and to promote distinctive Christian action as both a necessary and prudent measure within a fallen world. Doubtless, conceptual and strategic difficulties arise here, but they do so, it seems to me, less from Kuyper's particular social theorizing than from his dualisms of antithesis and common grace, common humanity, and discrete Christianity, and thence back to the paradoxes of Calvinism's absolute divine sovereignty and radical human depravity.

As to the apparently more modest point, I believe that Kuyper was not just worried about an overbearing State-sovereignty in late career but from the very start. It is true that this specter did not strike him as a "fully articulated political theory"² in 1873, when he gave his oration on "Calvinism: The Origin and Safeguard of Our Constitutional Liberties." But that speech does begin with several paragraphs expressing anxiety over the State-centralization and consolidation that were occurring across "our eastern borders"³—that is, in Bismarck's newly forged German Empire. The *Kulturkampf* that would threaten the Catholic Church in Germany over the next dozen years helped motivate Kuyper's first great crusade, for the "liberation" of the Church in the Netherlands. More broadly, the processes of homogenization and modernization that were State sovereignty's *cultural* counterpart served as Kuyper's target in his inaugural address as a public intellectual in 1869 ("Uniformity, the Curse of Modern Life").⁴ In other words, State sovereignty worried him in its "conservative" as well as its Socialist manifestations, and clouded his horizon early as well as late.

This modest demurrer has an obvious but significant implication. It forces us to note, especially apropos of Kuyper's social thought, that he was responding to his times and not simply proceeding by logical deduction from fixed principles. Certainly, he often invoked such principles, not least to bolster his authority or his followers' sense of security. But Kuyper argued that he practiced "inductive" in contrast to his opponents' "deductive" social thinking,⁵ and he was Burkean enough to disavow *a priori* ideologies, statesman enough to know the importance of practical wisdom in the exercise of his craft, and polemicist enough to know how to harness an abstract principle to serve the application of the moment. With Kuyper, political philosophy was *underdeterminative* of political position; political context was also, and always, crucial. Can anyone imagine that his turn from Anglophile to Anglophobe at the end of the 1890s was not caused primarily by John Bull's (in Kuyper's eyes) impe-

rial aggressions against the doughty Boers?⁶ That his invocation of some change in religiously rooted principle to explain the change in British policy was only of rhetorical, not of analytical, use? Can anyone read his disparagement of the strategies pursued by French Protestants in the Reformation—Calvinists though they were—and not see close parallels to his criticism of the Enlightenment-driven Revolution, thereby implying that the problem of 1789 for Kuyper was, in some substantial way, part *French* and not simply *Revolution*?⁷

To philosophy and context I add a third essential ingredient to the stew of Kuyper's political thinking, and that is: passion. Admittedly, passion is a tricky element to invoke in his connection since Kuyper more than once warned against the forces it could unleash among the lower orders and the license it might give people to justify their actions as they went along. The rationalistic, systematic Kuyper liked comprehensive political platforms, hierarchically organized under absolute principles, strong on clarity and controls. He knew how self-interest, self-seeking, and bald depravity could sweep a person—a whole populace—away. But this apollonian Kuyper could barely contain the man of zest and fury who exploded onto the national stage outraged by insults to the honor of God, outraged by injustice, contemptuous of place-holders and routine, enamored of combat, an early master of mass politics who knew how crucial morale and myth (he called them inspirited "ideals") were to electoral success.⁸ Kuyper, in his early days, was a promising scholar, and from time to time in his later career professed a yearning for the studious life of research and writing. But first, always, he had to return to the fray, and not just the battle of political theory but of programs, popular elections, and party organization. We need to examine the passions that drove him, in order to understand the message that he sounded, especially on the dominant "social question" of his day.

I suggest that behind this question and several others as well, there burned in Kuyper a passionate concern about the poor. Usually *for* the poor, but more broadly as well, *about* the poor. In these broader reaches, Kuyper again could show fear—not so much of the poor but of what poverty and oppression might arouse in the poor by way of violent upheaval.⁹ He did not sentimentalize the poor, did not think that less iniquity dwelt with them, did not believe that the poor-become-rich would behave any better than those they had displaced. But even in their most twisted discontent, he offered the poor a heart of sympathy.

When, in the midst of our social misery, I observe the demoralization that follows on the heels of material need, and hear a raucous voice which ...

curses God, mocks his Word, insults the cross of Golgotha, and tramples on whatever witness was still in the conscience—all in order to inflame everything wild and brutish in the human heart—then I stand before an abyss of spiritual misery that arouses my human compassion almost more than does the most biting poverty.¹⁰

Kuyper's passion for the poor was persistent, not just at the 1891 Christian Social Congress but long before it and long after it; nor just in his pronouncements on social ethics but also in his politics, his history, his biblical commentary, his ecclesiology, his school and university reforms: Everywhere the poor appeared, everywhere their oppression rankled, and everywhere Kuyper put God squarely on their side. He called his followers to join the Master there. "You do not honor God's Word," he warned, if "you ever forget how the Christ (just as his prophets before him and his apostles after him) invariably took sides *against* those who were powerful and living in luxury, and *for* the suffering and oppressed."¹¹ Indeed, he deemed the very existence of the social question, the accumulation of titanic wealth, on the one hand, over against hunger and homelessness on the other, as the Church's greatest shame, an open invitation to its enemies, an index of how little the Gospel had been taken to heart. "How entirely different things would be in Christendom if the preaching of Jesus were also *our* preaching, and if the basic principles of his Kingdom had not been cut off and cast away from our social life by virtue of over-spiritualization."¹²

Kuyper attributed the social crisis to some extra-Christian causes as well, which he collected under the label of the French Revolution. Two cardinal points that Peter Heslam recounts from Kuyper's criticism of its political theory also apply to its social consequences.¹³ First of all, Kuyper argued, the Revolution had atomized the organic unity of society. The webs of mutual support and obligation that might help the needy, both materially and psychologically, had given way to the grasping, self-seeking individual, the stronger of whom could now press their advantage without compunction. This was made possible, second, because the putative atheism of the Revolution had instilled a new consciousness in the European mind. The Revolution had eclipsed the heavens, blotted out eternity, and left the present material order as the only range of human hope. Taken religiously, this materialization of life amounted to Mammon-worship, Kuyper declared. He devoted his 1891 address on "The Social Question and the Christian Religion" to delineating its manifestations, excoriating its consequences, and calling Christians to live by a godly alternative. He did so not philosophically but with passionate, plain talk.

Over against [Christian] compassion, the French Revolution placed the egoism of a passionate struggle for possessions.... It made the possession of money the highest good, and then, in the struggle for money, it set every man against every other.... The law of the animal world—dog-eat-dog—became the basic law for every social relationship. The love of money, the holy apostle taught us, is the root of all evil. As soon as that evil demon was unchained at the turn of the century, no consideration was shrewd enough, no strategy crafty enough, no deception outrageous enough among those who, through superiority of knowledge, position, and capital, took money—and ever more money—from the socially weaker.¹⁴

The net result of the French Revolution, after all its fluctuations, was that “a new aristocracy, an aristocracy of much lower caliber—an *aristocracy of money*—set itself up to lay down the law to us, to put its foot on our neck....”¹⁵ So cry the radicals of our time, Kuyper declared, and so right they were. The bankers, merchants, and thieves who had risen by revolution might not complain if the oppressed now wanted to extend that revolution a little further down.

We can, in like manner, stretch the label that Kuyper used. From his line of analysis, from the context of his speech, and from direct quotation, it is clear that “Revolution,” for Kuyper, meant the Industrial Revolution under capitalist auspices too: The “one-dimensional individualism of the French Revolution” had “its corresponding economic school of *laissez-faire*.”¹⁶ Kuyper was speaking in 1891 from the midst of that phenomenon, industrialization having commenced in the Netherlands only around 1870. The fallout was familiar: in the agricultural sector a twenty-year depression from 1873 on; in the industrial sector, some quick, early growth followed by a traumatic slump in the mid-1880s.¹⁷ These circumstances, which, in their contemporaneous French setting promoted Zola to write *Germinal*, provoked Kuyper’s key social statements and their consistent moral condemnation. If Christians abhorred the candor and solutions that the Zolas of the world were offering up, they had better think hard and consistently from their biblical commitments to fashion an alternative. A sweeter piety, a more generous charity would not do; “the very foundation of our society’s organization” was in question, demanding “an architectonic critique ... which leads to the desire for a different arrangement of the social order.”¹⁸ The Mammonization of life, in its capitalist as well as its Socialist phases, compelled Christians to reject the premises on which it is built: the Enlightened deistic presuppositions of the Scots’ science of man that constituted the seedbed of capitalist theory; the same science’s calculated ethics by which concern for another served only a more generous self-interest;

the utilitarian reduction of a laborer to an impersonal quantum; the sacralization of property rights; the misapprehension of wealth for well-being; the commitment to ideology—laissez-faire capitalist as well as Socialist—that blinded the ideologue to persons, history, and the nuances of circumstance.

But Kuyper was not only speaking to the revolutionary premises of industrial capitalism. He cited its historical precedents as well in a narrative of the chronic deprivations of the rich. Kuyper found these, of course, in biblical materials and recalled them from the classical history he had studied in gymnasium, but he cited them most often in his own country's history with its Amsterdam regency of merchant princes and commercial grandees. It was they who had siphoned off the wealth of the Netherlands' golden age and presided over its subsequent stagnation. It was they who had set a cultural tone that ignored commoners when it did not despise them. It was they who had made over the Dutch Reformed Church into a privileged club. "The poor of the Church, O, it cries to high heaven," Kuyper declaimed in the wake of his own ouster therefrom in 1886:

For centuries now the poor of the Church here in Amsterdam were virtually excluded, crowded out, sent packing ... it was always the man with the golden ring who had priority.... Are you not struck by the idea that in the perplexity now descending on our Church this discrimination against the Lord's poor, this introduction of class distinction, is punishing itself?¹⁹

Nor did the regents' progeny atop the government respect the autonomy and integrity of learning. "It cannot be said often enough," Kuyper declared in inaugurating the Free University, that "money creates power *for* the one who gives *over* the one who receives."²⁰ The commercial elite in collusion with certain circles of intellectuals had used the State purse to secularize higher education. And this was possible because, back in the political realm, they had conspired among themselves to restrict the franchise so that only the upper bourgeoisie could vote.²¹

For Kuyper, in sum, the course of modern Dutch history had been a contest between rich and poor, elite and commoner, and—by direct translation— theological liberal versus stout Calvinist. Broadening the civil franchise, therefore, was both just and politique.

Do not all the Scriptures preach, and do not history and experience teach, that the moral power of faith tends to reside much more among the "little people" who run short every year than among the affluent who every year increase their net worth?²²

Conversely, as Jesus himself said, the rich were unlikely to be of the kingdom of heaven and were capable of entering there only by an extraordinary measure of grace that would shrink and humble them until they could fit through the eye of a needle.²³ As in heaven, so on earth: It is striking how consistently Kuyper distrusted the rich—or, better, riches. Wealth always stood with him under a pall of suspicion, as a temptation to pride, to sloth, to luxury and ease that inevitably spread oppression and corrupted the morale of the body politic. The rich were always to be judged by their stewardship strictly taken and regularly monitored, by their subordination to communal standards of judgment, by their contribution to the betterment of the whole, and by their sacrificial devotion to the cause of the least privileged therein.

Obviously, Kuyper's social thought does not fall neatly into our standard categories between Left and Right. *Liberal* was his favorite epithet, but the term then covered much that goes by "conservative" today. Kuyper did not advocate the expropriation of wealth by State power or Socialist revolution; he frowned on State regulation and would have little love for the welfare State, but one of his arguments against regulation was precisely the susceptibility of the State to the influence of wealth and power. "The stronger, almost without exception, have always known how to bend every custom and magisterial ordinance so that the profit is theirs and the loss belongs to the weaker."²⁴ Kuyper abhorred economic policies and practices that proceeded by abstracting "economic man" from the whole human being, that reduced image-bearers of God to "factors of production," that looked to the increase of wealth to solve social problems and that would increase such wealth by giving carte blanche to the wealthy. He opposed the laissez-faire capitalism of his day, the dogma of free trade, the surrender of culture to the marketplace. He would view our present circumstance, in which one party enshrines "free choice" for "economics" and the other for "personal morality," as inconsistent and naive on both sides. His prescription for social well-being began with individual initiative, but it also protected the prospects for such initiative by demanding that disparities in power between labor and capital be equalized through an updated version of the medieval guild system, in which councils of labor and councils of industry and commerce would negotiate wages and work conditions together under the prospect of binding arbitration.²⁵

This sort of collaboration signals Kuyper's ultimate hope, and his key social-theoretical premise. Class-conscious as he was, he took an integral view of human society as one body. Class strife had to be reconciled into organic wholeness without the organism falling into the stasis or hierarchy

that afflicted such models of society. Against the prospects of Socialist collectivism, the raw pursuit of self-interest, and pious effusions about the Unseen Hand, Kuyper called for the conscious cultivation of Christian fraternity.

The question on which the whole social problem really pivots is whether you recognize in the less fortunate, even in the poorest, not merely a creature, a person in wretched circumstances, but one of your own flesh and blood: for the sake of Christ, *your brother*.²⁶

Let people contend over the ways in which this consciousness might be elaborated in social structure and economic action; so long as this consciousness bore down as motivation and judge, the system would not go far wrong. Let the privileged look first to their own responsibilities and give the poor their rights—that is, let the usual order of things be reversed—and the situation would not get out of hand.

Critics on the Left would fault this proposal as laughably naive and altogether inadequate. His disciples on the Right would worry more about the State than about the poor. Both sides and those in between might well think again—in light of the history since his time, in light of our present circumstances, and in light of the Christian commandments—whether Kuyper’s passion for the poor is, if not the fullness of policy, at least the beginning of justice.

Notes

1. All quotations are from Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper’s Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 160.
2. Heslam, *Christian Worldview*, 153.
3. Abraham Kuyper, “Calvinism: The Origin and Safeguard of Our Constitutional Liberties,” in James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 282.
4. Abraham Kuyper, “Uniformity, the Curse of Modern Life,” in Bratt, *Centennial Reader*, 19–44.
5. H. E. S. Woldring, “De sociale kwestie—meer dan een emancipatiestrijd,” in C. Augustijn et al., eds., *Abraham Kuyper: zijn volksdeel, zijn invloed* (Delft: Meinema, 1987), 126.
6. See Abraham Kuyper, “The South African Crisis,” in Bratt, *Centennial Reader*, 323–60.

7. Kuyper, "Calvinism and Constitutional Liberties," 299–302.
8. For a fine example of Kuyper as political orator, see his "Maranatha!" in Bratt, *Centennial Reader*, 205–28. He explicitly discusses political leadership and mass psychology in "Our Instinctive Life," in Bratt, *Centennial Reader*, 264–66.
9. Kuyper, "Maranatha!" 221–22; Abraham Kuyper, "The Blurring of the Boundaries," in Bratt, *Centennial Reader*, 392–93; Abraham Kuyper, *Demokratische Klippen* (Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1895).
10. Abraham Kuyper, "The Social Question and the Christian Religion" [*Het Sociale Vraagstuk en de Christelijke Religie*, 1891], in English, *The Problem of Poverty*, ed. James W. Skillen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 62–63.
11. Kuyper, "Social Question," 62.
12. Kuyper, "Social Question," 61; Abraham Kuyper, *De Christus en de Sociale Nooden* (Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1895), 33.
13. Kuyper performs this analysis in "Social Question," 43–52.
14. Kuyper, "Social Question," 44–46. For explicit references to Mammon, see 37, 51, in *Christus en Sociale Nooden*, 13–15, 33–34.
15. Kuyper, "Social Question," 48–49 (quotation, 48); Kuyper, "Maranatha!," 213, 221.
16. Kuyper, "Social Question," 54.
17. E. H. Kossman, *The Low Countries, 1780–1940* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 314–18.
18. Kuyper, "Social Question," 50–51.
19. Abraham Kuyper, "It Shall Not Be So Among You," in Bratt, *Centennial Reader*, 129.
20. Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," in Bratt, *Centennial Reader*, 478.
21. Kuyper, "Our Instinctive Life," 273–74.
22. Kuyper, "Maranatha!," 223.
23. Kuyper, *Christus en Sociale Nooden*, 47.
24. Kuyper, "Social Question," 33.
25. Kuyper details this plan in "Manual Labor," in Bratt, *Centennial Reader*, 240–48. For general discussions of Kuyper's socioeconomic thought, see Woldring, "De sociale kwestie"; A. Kouwenhoven, "Economische opvattingen," in J. de Bruijn, ed., *Een land nog niet in kaart gebracht* (Amsterdam: Passage, 1987), 135–50; Jan Romein, "Abraham Kuyper: de klokkenist der kleine luyden," in Jan and Annie Romein, *Erfaters van onze beschaving* (Amsterdam: Querido's, 1971),

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747–70; D. Buitendijk-Mulder, “Kuyper, de armen en het diaconaat,” *Bezinning* 12 (1957): 344–59; Jan Janze, “Een Vergeten Grootheid,” *De Nieuwe Stem* 16/6 (June 1961): 377–90; and Okke Jager, “De Sociale Kwestie,” in *Schrake troost in magere jaren* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1976), 14–55. The essays in G. J. Schutte, ed., *Een arbeider is zijn loon waardig: ... De ontwikkeling van het christelijk-sociale denken en handelen in Nederland, 1891–1914* (The Hague: Meinema, 1991), give illuminating comparative and contextual perspective on the 1891 Christian Social Congress and Kuyper’s part in it.

26. Kuyper, “Social Question,” 75.