In the meantime: Christians in public life

by Richard J. Mouw in the August 23, 2011 issue

Several years ago I met in Washington, D.C., with a group of about two dozen young Christian professionals who worked on various congressional staffs and in lobby groups, federal agencies and think tanks. I found them to be a very thoughtful group, intensely interested in integrating their basic evangelical convictions with the day-to-day pursuit of their work assignments.

As these young evangelicals talked about the theological issues that most concerned them in their work in the public arena, one of the dominant questions that occupied their minds was the degree to which we can expect success in our efforts to promote public righteousness during this time when we still await the return of Christ. In struggling with this issue they were clearly attempting to find an alternative to two options that evangelicals often have seen themselves as having to choose between. Either we try as much as possible to stay out of the cultural mainstream, standing over against it as we wait for the final judgment, or we attempt to take over the culture.

We can see both options at work during the past century. The "fundamentalist-modernist" controversy of the first few decades of the 20th century led religious conservatives to a strong sense of alienation from the Protestant mainline as well as from the dominant patterns of the larger culture.

This posture began to change around mid-century, but the changes became especially visible around 1980, when the "faithful remnant" mentality of much of

evangelicalism suddenly transformed into a sense of being "the Moral Majority"—one of the better-known organizations of the Christian right. That kind of activism was often accused of "theocratic" motives—a desire to return the U.S. to what many of the evangelical activists saw as its original status as "a Christian nation."

The young evangelical professionals with whom I met were not theocrats who were hoping for a Christian takeover of the public arena. And they certainly were not world-fleeing fundamentalists. They were trying to stake out an alternative approach.

The Dutch theologian and politicial leader Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) would have supported their effort. In his thinking about political life, he was convinced that there are good Christian reasons for trying to accomplish some good things, even though we know that we are not likely to achieve any major victories.

The Kuyperian motive for involvement in public life is not to win the battle for righteousness in the here-and-now. None of us is the Messiah. The world has already been given one supremely excellent Messiah, and he has guaranteed that in the final reckoning everything will be made right. In the meantime, though, we must take advantage of every opportunity available to us to do whatever we can to promote his cause—knowing all the time that the final victory will happen only when the Lord decides that it is ready to happen.

Kuyper's approach has clear biblical grounding. For example, there came a point in the life of ancient Israel when God's chosen people were carried off into captivity in the wicked city of Babylon. This was a troubling situation for them: no temple in which to worship the Lord, no godly rulers, no laws based on revealed guidance about how to live. Then the Lord gave the prophet Jeremiah some new instructions for the captive Israelites. He told them that God wanted them to build houses for their families to live in and to plant crops for their livelihood. God also instructed them to "multiply there," marrying and producing children. But then God gave them this assignment for their lives as citizens: "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer. 29:5–7). The Hebrew word for welfare here is *shalom,* which is often translated as peace but also includes the notions of justice and righteousness.

Similar advice is given to the New Testament church. The apostle Peter addresses believers who, like those ancient Israelites in Babylon, are "aliens and exiles" in the

places where they live. And he gives a similar assignment: "Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles," he says, "so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds, and glorify God when he comes to judge" (1 Pet. 2:11–12).

The mandate should be clear: we have to care about the welfare of our fellow human beings, and we must act honorably in their midst.

I do quite a bit of reading in the history of democratic thought. While the origins of democratic theory and practice lie in ancient Greece and Rome, much of the significant thought on the subject occurred in the past four centuries or so in Great Britain and the United States. Political thinkers past and present disagree widely on many of the issues, but there is some consensus on at least two key points. One is that democratic politics requires a willingness to work at compromises. The other is that democracy at its best is practiced by leaders who are willing to engage each other in intelligent and reasoned debate about the fundamental issues at stake in a civil society.

The Mennonites have a wonderful phrase to describe our present situation as Christians. We are "living in the time of God's patience." If God is patient, we must be also. We need to patiently engage the issues in our democratic system, with a willingness to find less-than-perfect solutions. But it does take some effort to cultivate that kind of patience. It is understandable that if we get genuinely involved in "seeking the welfare" of the larger society in which we live, we will want to succeed in our efforts to bring about some good.

Kuyper offers us an excellent theological basis for working to cultivate that kind of patience. All the square inches of creation belong to Jesus. God in Christ presently rules over all things and over all people. To be sure, many people in the world today do not acknowledge that fact. They do not recognize the authority of Jesus Christ. Indeed, it isn't just that they refuse to acknowledge his authority—they live in ways that openly oppose God's will.

But someday all of this will be straightened out. Jesus will appear on the clouds "and every eye will see him" (Rev. 1:7). The question for Christians today, then, is the one the young evangelical professionals in Washington were posing: How do we act in the meantime? What is our responsibility as citizens in societies in which people do not acknowledge that there is a God who rules over all things?

For Kuyper, a democratic system provided the best framework for Christian involvement in public life under sinful conditions. He could even wax eloquent about how Calvinism has been a major force in history in undergirding democracy.

He may have been overstating the historical case a little, but Kuyper was right to insist that, properly understood, there is an intimate link between a belief in God's sovereignty and democratic ideals. If God's authority alone is absolute, then no human government has the right to claim absolute authority over its citizens. And given the propensity toward sinfulness in all human individuals and institutions, governments are not only necessary safeguards against sin, they are themselves affected by our common depravity. Thus the need both to respect government's proper ordering role and to be clear about its God-ordained limitations.

Kuyper gave much thought to how a society ought to be structured when it encompasses a diversity of belief systems and lifestyles. He was adamant in his refusal to resort to imposing an "established religion" on this diversity. Historian James Bratt puts it nicely: "Kuyper did not want a naked public square but a crowded one," with no belief system "having an official advantage." Kuyper was endorsing "pluralism under secularization but not secularism"—that is, he was showing us how to encourage the interaction among a plurality of viewpoints in a highly secularized culture, but without turning the secular into an "ism," an ideology that simply leaves God out of the picture.

In Kuyper's view, the state should act more like a referee than like a coach or a cheerleader, showing impartiality toward a variety of religious and moral perspectives—as well as irreligious and immoral ones—while allowing them to compete for the allegiances of citizens within a framework characterized by fair play.

To be sure, support for this kind of referee political system does not come easily for those who nurture deep convictions about what is right or wrong. This is why we have to keep reminding ourselves that there is a Judgment Day coming, but that it has not yet arrived. We live in a time when righteousness and unrighteousness exist side by side, and believers must establish their patterns of living with this fact in mind.

It also important to keep reminding ourselves that the struggle against sin is waged within each human soul. The line between good and evil cannot be easily drawn between groups of people. The real conflict is between differing sets of basic life-

guiding principles. Believers may have the right principles, but they continue to be plagued by their innate sinfulness. The antithesis reaches into each of us. And because of the workings of common grace, unbelievers often perform better than we might expect, even when they serve perverse principles.

A theologian whom I greatly respect once told me that he was puzzled by my admiration for Kuyper—and especially by my insistence that Kuyper's views are helpful today. "After all," he said, "we are in a post-Christendom period in human history, and Kuyper's thought is still very Constantinian." No call for a Kuyper-type approach to culture in general, and politics in particular, can avoid addressing that issue.

The post-Christendom label is a case in point for the considerable talk these days about our being "post" this or that pattern of the past. Kuyper's thought fits nicely in certain respects with the way contemporary postmodern thinkers discuss the defects of "the Enlightenment project."

Enlightenment thought saw human reason—or more generally, an enlightened human consciousness—as the highest standard in the universe for deciding issues of truth and goodness. On that view, if there is anything worthwhile in religion, we find it by seeing whether it conforms to or even reinforces what we "enlightened" human beings can come to know without the aid of any sort of revelation.

Most of the postmodern thinkers who are asking us to move to a post-Enlightenment way of viewing reality are not calling for a return to relying on God as the source of meaning and truth. And even in the Christian world, the demand for a post-Enlightenment perspective is not regularly linked to a commitment to classic orthodoxy. But that is precisely what Kuyper was after. He rejected the supremacy of enlightened human consciousness in order to highlight the fact that it is God's will alone that reigns supreme in the universe.

Kuyper's rejection of Enlightenment thinking has a close connection to his views about the political arrangement that people have in mind today when they condemn "Christendom." Bratt points to that connection when he says that the rejection of the Enlightenment enabled the neo-Calvinists to declare, to their everlasting credit, that reason was the servant of the heart; that no intellectual activity, including the natural sciences, was impartial or value-free or without presuppositions; and that every social organization operated according to and in the interests of an ideology.

Both the Enlightenment and Christendom were linked to ideologies about social organization that Kuyper rejected. In the case of the Enlightenment, Kuyper saw its philosophical perspective as the inspiration for the French Revolution, in which crowds of people, inspired by the Enlightenment's proclamation of the sovereignty of reason, set out to overthrow ancient orders and practices, beheading public officials and desecrating places of worship. All of that was a manifestation of a basic project which, as Kuyper put it, "substituted the will of the individual for the will of the Creator of nations." When he chose to name his political party "the Anti-Revolutionary Party," it was precisely the French Revolution that he had in mind.

But in opposing the ideology undergirding the French Revolution, Kuyper was not attempting to preserve all that the French Revolution had been bent on destroying. His complaint about the French Revolution was that its ideology was so all-embracing that it used "enlightened" political power to diminish the life of the other spheres. And he had the same kind of worry about the older Constantinian alliance between church and state.

Bratt observes that one of Kuyper's key objections to the ideology of the French Revolution was that "it shattered social bonds by valorizing the individual and the ethic of self-interest." In its own way, Constantinianism fostered a similar kind of shattering, by attempting to subsume all the spheres of life under the control of a church-state alliance.

The criticisms of the Constantinian arrangement are legitimate. When the church allies itself too closely with political power it loses the freedom to be the kind of church that God wants it to be.

The late Lesslie Newbigin, who served for many years during the 20th century as a missionary in India, made this case very effectively. When Newbigin returned to the British Isles upon his retirement, he was shocked by the major cultural changes that had taken place there as well as on the European continent and in North America. When he began his career he saw himself as being sent out from a Christian culture—where Christianity was "the established religion"—to a mission field. But now he realized that his own homeland had become a mission field. Christians in the West, Newbigin observed, could no longer take a dominant Christian influence for granted. We are now, he said, "post-Christendom." But that is not a thing to be regretted, he quickly added; the church should always see itself as missional. The Christendom arrangement lured the church into a sense of "owning" the culture that

kept it from full faithfulness to the gospel.

All of that can be enthusiastically endorsed by Kuyperians. One of the reasons why Kuyper thought of himself as a neo-Calvinist was because he wanted to distance himself from the way earlier generations of Calvinists had used political power to further the church's cause.

The problem, though, is that sometimes those who make much of the dangers of Constantinianism and Christendom place overly strict limits on how Christians can relate to public life. This was made clear to me in the conversation with the theologian who thought that my affinity with Kuyper meant that I am dangerously close to Constantinianism. I pushed the person to explain why he interpreted my perspective in that manner. His response came in the form of two questions: Do I think that Christians can work effectively for Christian goals "within the American political system"? And do I believe that Christians can not only endorse the use of violence in law enforcement and military campaigns, but actually themselves serve as police and members of the
military?

I responded to both questions in the affirmative, but also with the necessary qualifications. I believe that there are limits to the kinds of political compromises that Christians can agree to. And I also believe that police action and military campaigns must be conducted within the kind of moral framework associated with just war doctrine. The response: "Aha! So you admit it. You really are a Constantinian!"

The fact is that my argument has to do with issues that go back at least as far as the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. The Anabaptist wing of the Reformation insisted that the other Protestant movements, Lutheranism and Calvinism, had not adequately broken with Catholic thought and practice on some crucial issues. *Anabaptism* means "rebaptism," which signifies the Anabaptist rejection of infant baptism. Any person who had been baptized as a baby had to be rebaptized as an adult if that person wanted to join the Anabaptist community.

Obviously, this insistence was in good part based on questions of biblical interpretation. But the Anabaptists also argued that because of the Constantinian arrangement, infant baptism was too closely tied to the idea of citizenship. They called for the church to be a community of disciples—of persons who make a

conscious adult decision, signified in baptism by immersion, to follow the Way of the Cross—who live with a clear sense of being over against the dominant culture. This includes both a commitment to nonviolence and a refusal to serve as agents of the worldly "powers that be."

The debate about such matters is still alive, with many influential Christian leaders today arguing that the gospel calls us to a way of life so antithetical to the patterns of collective life in the larger human culture that Christians are required, in effect, to create an alternative culture. One influential example of such thinking is the 1989 book by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens,* in which the authors issue an Anabaptist-type call for the formation of a kingdom community living in separation from the practices of the larger human community, especially those practices that are closely aligned with the political assumptions of secular thought.

I take an important cue on this subject from Newbigin. As critical as he was of the Constantinian/Christendom arrangement, he insisted that we must be careful in our assessment of what the errors of that arrangement were. "Much has been written," he observed, "about the harm done to the cause of the gospel when Constantine accepted baptism, and it is not difficult to expatiate on this theme." There can be no question, Newbigin said, that the church has regularly fallen "into the temptation of worldly power." But he goes on: should we conclude from this that the proper alternative was for the church simply to "have . . . washed its hands of responsibility for the political order"?

Do we really think, Newbigin asks, that the cause of the gospel would have been better served "if the church had refused all political responsibility, if there had never been a 'Christian' Europe"? The fact is, he notes, that the Constantinian project had its origins in a creative response to a significant cultural challenge. There was in Constantine's day, he says, a spiritual crisis in the larger culture, and people "turned to the church as the one society that could hold a disintegrating world together." And for all the mistakes that were made along the way, it was nonetheless a good thing that the church actively took up this challenge.

This is an insightful analysis, and there is every reason to think that Kuyper would agree with Newbigin. For Kuyper, there is nothing wrong with working within the political structures to serve the cause of righteousness in the world. But we must always do so with an awareness of the Constantinian danger of forming an

unhealthy—and unfaithful—alliance between the church and political power.

This article is excerpted from Richard J. Mouw's book Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction, *just published by Eerdmans.*