

Social Policy After Modernism:

A Citizen's Guide to Welfare Reform in the United States

The 2002-2003 Calvin Lectures

Kurt C. Schaefer

Preface

The last decade--the 1990s--was a fascinating time to be a social scientist. The decade was launched by the demise of an enormous experiment in social engineering: the centrally-planned societies of eastern Europe. That social experiment was characteristic of Modernism, a period and attitude toward life that I will try to define in the first chapter of this little book. Throughout the decade other things associated with modernism were challenged, ranging from the modern welfare state to various ideas about the nature of truth. Many concluded that we had entered a post-modern era. I'll have to dispute that notion eventually, but there is no denying that these have been interesting times.

During the same decade, the renaissance in orthodox Christian scholarship seemed to reach critical mass and take on a self-sustaining life of its own. Scholars and practitioners who endeavor to write, think and act from self-consciously Christian foundations have re-emerged as a serious voice to be reckoned with.

There you have two important trends from the 1990s. This group of lectures tries to make a contribution to the situation by bringing these two trends together for a specific case-study. I will be reflecting on the United States' major social experiment of the 1990s--welfare reform--and trying to do so as a self-consciously Christian scholar.

I teach economics at a Christian liberal-arts college in the Midwest. That college and its sponsoring denomination have created a lectureship grants one faculty member each year a release from two courses of teaching, to allow the preparation of a series of lectures and a book containing those lectures. The lectureship also covers travel expenses for a series of trips, mainly to academic centers, during which lectures are delivered and a great many good conversations take place. I am the fourth of these Calvin Lecturers, and in my case the years' venues included the University of Minnesota (co-sponsored with the MacLaurin Institute), the University of British Columbia (co-sponsored with the Graduate Inter-Varsity chapter and the UBC Faculty Christian Fellowship), Regent College (Vancouver), Baylor University (to a conference sponsored by the University), Semmelweis University and the Protestant Forum in Budapest, LÁbri Fellowship in Switzerland, a pair of seminars in Belfast (co-sponsored by Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland, Evangelical Alliance, and Christian Action, Research, and Education), the University of Illinois Chanpaign-Urbana (co-sponsored by the Wednesday Forum, the Faculty and Staff Christian Fellowship, and Graduate Inter-Varsity), York University Toronto (co-sponsored by Inter-Varsity), the Univerisity of Michigan (co-sponsored by Graduate Inter-Varsity), Gordon College (sponsored by their generous Franz Lecture Series), and several churches in the Grand Rapids area. I am very deeply in the debt of

many people who hosted, encouraged, and challenged me at these venues. I am also obliged to many colleagues at Calvin College, particularly the administrators who oversee the lectureship, and my friends in my academic department who have been my teachers, mentors and encouragers. I will not list names, partly because even a very long list would inevitably slight someone, and partly because I don't like namedropping. In general, the wisest and most helpful comments and questions have often come from young students struggling to live faithfully as Christians in hostile circumstances.

Rather than abstract the lectures from their actual, living, historical context, I've decided that it makes for a richer, more nuanced and more interesting book to present the lectures substantially as they were actually delivered in particular places. It's easy to forget that the formation of good social policy always involves a great deal of fine-grained, detailed information about the specific context that you are affecting--"the devil is in the details"-- and I hope that the context-specific nature of these lectures will help to quietly remind us all of this fact. When I write about the role of private charities and church-state relationships in providing social services, you will be reading an account of seminars Belfast; when I directly discuss contextual worldview issues, you will read me conversing about them at Swiss L'Abri; when I discuss the North-American welfare reform process, you will see how I approached it with Canadian groups. I have edited the lectures a bit so they will flow together as a book, but I have left them, as much as is reasonable, in their as-delivered context.

Of course, my greatest debt of gratitude is owed to my immediate family, Anne,

Benjamin and Elizabeth, who have made more sacrifices than I in seeing that this lectureship would be successfully completed, and who continue to be my wisest teachers and mentors.

Lecture One: Historical Context and Basic Theologyⁱ

LÁbri Fellowship, Huemoz, Switzerland, January 2003

It is a great pleasure to finally have arrived at LÁbri Fellowship. When I was twenty years old, about the age of most of you here, I passed a five-week winter break from classes by reading The God Who Is There, one of the three books that form the basic trilogy by LÁbri's co-founder, Francis Schaeffer. The book presents a summary of Schaeffer's Christian analysis of western society, especially its metaphysical foundations. I spent part of the next summer reading He Is There and He Is Not Silent, Schaeffer's treatise on epistemology. Then I discovered that on my dad's shortwave radio I could hear taped Schaeffer broadcasts at 10:30 p.m. on Sunday evenings. So I formed a little Francis and Edith Schaeffer Reading Club. We would read a chapter of a Schaeffer book each week, then meet at 9:30 on Sundays for a one-hour discussion of the chapter. Then at 10:30 we would turn down the lights for the rather other-worldly experience of hearing Schaeffer among the whooshes and fadings of the shortwave broadcast.

These were rather simpler days, before wireless internet radio transmissions, e-mail, desktop computers (blow driers were a new thing!), and, sadly, days in which international travel seemed more intimidating and expensive, at least to me, than it does today. It would be a great regret that I did not come to LÁbri as a student, except that Francis and Edith Schaeffer always prayed that God would bring the correct people here and keep all others away. So I will trust that 21 January 2003 was the correct day for me

to arrive, and I am sure that I will long remember these next six days.

I will be talking about social policy--that is, the art and science by which a community tends itself. I will be speaking mainly about policy toward the poor, and mainly about policy within the United States. There will be three main lectures:

This one, dressing the stage, in which we will think about the historical context of the ideas that matter most to our subject, and the basic theology that can help us think more creatively and faithfully than we otherwise might.

A second, on American welfare reform in the 1990s, addressing the practical things we believe we are beginning to learn regarding poverty policy.

A third lecture about the legislation and practices that Americans call "Charitable Choice"--that is, a lecture about some of the ways that Americans and Europeans are shaping the role of faith and revelation in policy and politics.

You might say that the first lecture is largely about reading God's "special revelation" in His word and Son, the second lecture is about reading God's "natural revelation" in creation and human experience, and the third lecture is about one facet of how we should live as a result of what we have seen in these revelations.

A. Revelation and Observation: Culture's Sources of Authority

Francis Schaeffer was a master at giving broad cultural history in a way that could be grasped, remembered and discussed. His analysis of Western thought in The God

Who Is There is generally organized around the notion of "despair," and the ways in which choices and beliefs can lead to personal and communal despair. He rightly saw that this was Europe's post-war crisis--the ways in which modern, secular worldviews lead to an existential crisis. Secularism promised liberation from constraint, but delivered an unlivable personal captivity; it provided no adequate basis for any of the habits or choices that a fulfilling life requires.

I would like to start by attempting a similar broad, historical reading of Western culture, a bit repackaged because the daily existential reality in the West may have changed in the last forty years. Instead of encountering serious people dealing with existential despair--typified by the coffeehouse discussion or poetry reading--we often now encounter a weightless culture of amusement, distraction, abundance, indulgence and above all *aimlessness*. We live through a cultural crisis in *setting direction*, and ultimately a crisis in *cultural authority*. This culture is typified not by the restless radical, but rather by the suburban shopping mall, the internet porn addict, and the cable television surfer.

So, whereas Francis Schaeffer identified a "line of despair" in daily existence, beneath which Western culture sank as a theistic worldview was surrendered, I would instead like to organize some ideas around the culture's sources of authority. Where do we make an appeal in order for an idea or goal to be considered well-founded or defensible? Or, more specifically, what is the relationship between things we know by revelation and things we know by observation? Or, to put it one final way by echoing

Augustine's clever shorthand, what is the relationship between "faith" and "understanding?"

Consider three options, each of which were originally put forward as Christian options:

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1. *Faith Complements Understanding*

This tradition, which can be traced through Augustine, Calvin, and Kuyper (among others), holds that God has given people two types of revelations (as I've already suggested), and both need to be taken seriously. They are both revelations of the same God, and they do not ultimately conflict with each other. For example, in correspondence Calvin was once posed with a difficult question about the propriety of charging interest on loans. The Roman church's Canon Law generally forbade the practice, citing passages of scripture for support. Yet so much of daily experience seemed to call this prohibition into question. Europe saw that money was more than just a sterile medium of exchange. It held values over time and space, and allowed various cultures to specialize in their natural abilities and then trade their surplus. Money, by replacing barter, seemed to allow a number of good outcomes, and this would seem to justify having a positive price for money (that is, an interest rate). In fact the Church was lending out large sums of money at interest, despite its understanding of special

revelation. So... what was John Calvin's position on the charging of interest?

In his reply, Calvin refuses to let go of either revelation. He wrestles with them both until he reaches a resolution that takes both seriously. In the end, the scriptural injunctions against interest have a particular goal in mind--avoiding oppression of those who are marginalized by those who control resources. The injunctions are not general treatises on the nature of barter and the sterility of money, as the same scriptures in other places allow the charging of interest when the circumstances do not indicate an unfair power relationship. In fact, as his times showed, a nominal prohibition on interest-charging could sometimes be used by the rich and powerful as a means to *further oppress* the marginalized, by restricting access to capital and then giving it without price to the already well-endowed.

The same sort of sensitivities--the desire to affirm all that God has revealed, in Scripture or in the physical world and human experience--inform Calvin's cosmology. It would not sink his theology or view of scripture if (actually, when) he observed that the sun, not the earth, is the center of the solar system, or if geology indicated that the earth is a very old place, constructed over a long period of time.

2. Faith Trumps Understanding

The tradition I've been describing could be contrasted to parts of the Scholastic tradition it sought to reform, and to similar attitudes in other eras. This second approach, in general, expects to read answers to any variety of questions directly from Scripture, or

from some other source of first principles. Medieval Scholasticism would be one example. It was drawn partly from Aristotle's same tendency, which we might condense to a slogan: If we know a thing's nature, that settles the issue. For Aristotle, money is sterile by nature, unable to be productive, a mere unit of account; therefore charging interest must be wrong. Aristotle also argues that some people are by nature, from the moment of their birth, subject to servitude, and others destined to leadership; therefore chattel slavery must be proper-- in fact, a natural event. To fight slavery would be to fight nature. Some ancients argued from the same basis that women were by nature to be cast into three categories: intellectuals, prostitutes, and housewives.

Some of modern evangelicalism has the same set of instincts, though we seem to have gotten over the heliocentric solar system issue. But I still meet a good number of people who believe that, for example, modern welfare systems must be harmful because of something they think they know about human nature. The claims are made independent of actual study of modern welfare systems.

3. Faith is Irrelevant to Understanding

On the evening of November 10, 1619, Renee Descartes fell into a three-part trancelike dream, during which he believed the true nature of the universe had been revealed to him. Reality was, in his vision, a great geometrical system, and mathematics was the language in which this reality was constructed. By careful observation and reason, understanding could be developed independent of the beliefs of the observer. After a long gestation, the modern era was being born.

Though Descartes was willing to exempt humans and God from his geometric construction of the universe, the exemption eventually expired. Within two generations Leibniz was arguing that in all areas of life—law, economics and politics, as well as the natural sciences—observation independent of faith or revelation could be used to construct the good society. Faith, if relevant to life at all, operated in the private sphere of personal assurance or piety, though even there faith might be a stronger force for superstition and bigotry than for good. In fact, if only observation is necessary in order to construct the good society, why should anything more be necessary for constructing good individuals? For matters of public culture in the modern era, thinkers in this tradition came to view themselves as free--in fact bound—to be functional atheists. Facts speak for themselves, and are sufficient for constructing public civilization. We can be good without God.

This attitude—that public life is a realm of facts and measurement, whereas private life is the realm of subjective standards and faith—has been hailed by many names. Let us refer to this dualism simply as “modernism.” We find it scattered throughout political history—being pressed forward with special prominence in the French Revolution and its aftermath, but present wherever governance and politics are thought of as matters of secular technique. The same dualistic attitude actually dominates much of the modern Christian church, treating faith as an inner experience of personal benefit that begins and ends in the individual believer’s heart.

B. Modernism's Stability: Can We Know what is Good without God?

Others have asked if we can truly be good without God. There is a prior question: Can we even, with some confidence, *know what is good*, without revelation? This is modernism's basic claim. Particulars create their own undeniable universals.

This claim by modernism is one way to handle a basic issue that all diverse cultures face. Not all people agree on what counts as revelation. So how can diverse groups learn to live together so that genuine religious and philosophical differences are faced and socially accommodated? The dominant answer just prior to Descartes had been warfare: simply try to end differences of opinion within your cultural borders. Descartes and those following him give a different answer: Try to make these differences irrelevant to public culture.

This modernist worldview, which has come to dominate the west, has proven to be somewhat unstable. Francis Schaeffer pointed out its *existential* instability—its unreliability as a basis for daily living. Initially, modernism was exhilarating in the area of personal morality. No more feeling constrained by religious traditions. *Cogito, ergo sum*—we begin building our basis for life from the individual experience of existence, and work our way outward into public culture, all the while stripped free of faith traditions and communities. It is as if the parents have left us with the credit card and car keys for the weekend! Yet this proves an unstable basis for personal morality--for living a life that leaves us with a sense of meaning, or for living a kindly and other-oriented life

that we so desperately hope for and rejoice in when we encounter it in others. What is there in this modernist worldview that makes kindness preferable over self-assertion? Nothing--as modernist movements like nineteenth-century Social Darwinism have demonstrated. As Francis Schaeffer used to say, within the modernist worldview, why is caring for an abandoned baby to be preferred over simply killing the baby? Within the modern conception of things, is there any compelling basis for one over the other?

But personal morality is not the only kind of instability in this worldview, and I'd like to mention two of its other historic problems: modernism *as a basis for truth claims*, and modernism *as a basis for organizing society*.

1. *Modernism as a basis for truth claims*

As a basis for truth claims, modernism assumes that consensus will naturally emerge regarding what is good, with no need for revelation to bring the world around us into focus. Our eyesight is just fine on its own, thank you very much. We might call this "epistemological individualism."

This hoped-for natural consensus about truth and goodness often does not in practice emerge. This is what one might expect if the world was created good but has since suffered a fall; in that case, revelation can be a helpful guide in deciding whether a particular thing you're observing is part of the goodness intended for the creation, or part of the fallen distortion to which the creation has been subjected. (This might have saved Aristotle, for example, from concluding that oppression and prostitution are natural.)

Modernism does not offer such a transcendent guide to observation, and this leads to an unstable harmonic in the way cultures try to support truth claims:

a. Start with modernism's *Dualism*: Facts are believed to be distinct from beliefs and ultimate values; there is no integral relationship between revelation and observation.

b. This generally lead to some form of *Empiricism*, the belief that only "facts" are relevant to public culture; beliefs are subjective and superstitious at best, positively harmful and bigoted at worst.

c. Unfortunately, facts generally don't speak for themselves, and ultimate values do not emerge from observing the rough and tumble of life. This leads to a reaction typical of *Romanticism*: there is a reassertion of the need for ultimate values and first principles, without invoking the possibility of revelation. Often a trust in the power of poets or urgings of nature emerges.

d. Lacking a basis for romantic claims, the entire enterprise can crash into *Nihilism*: The romantic reassertions of ultimate values are exposed as mere cloaks for power-grabs; language itself is trapped within the habits of the communities that use it, and can not break free to grasp or express anything truly universal. There is skepticism that we can know anything. No universal language, no universal values-- just power.

There you have a rough map of the tendencies in Western thought in the last four hundred years.

Much of western culture is now said to be in a “postmodern” mood, by which people mean that the last vestiges of empiricism are under threat, often taken down directly into nihilism by skeptics. But I think “postmodern” is a misnomer for this phenomenon. This defeat of empiricism is itself one of the parts of modernism’s cycle of thought. To be “postmodern” would be to start from a different initial foundation than modernism.

2. Modernism as a basis for organizing society

Modernism approaches truth by stripping the person down to a naked individual in a naked public square. Modernism then expects that naked individuals will naturally form a consensus about good and right, and thus form a social contract that pursues justice. This is the gist of classical liberalism: Let free, autonomous individuals make self-interested choices, and the social good will naturally emerge.

While this seemed exhilarating to people living under feudalism and other tyrannies, consider how frequently it has also proven an unstable practical basis for political and economic life. Just as *epistemological* individualism eventually leads to nihilism, raw assertions of power, and an inability to believe in real communication, so *political* individualism often has led to discord, disunity, and confusion, in which the ultimate solution was an imposed consensus through a new form of tyranny. Popular sovereignty, in its atomistic form without an appeal to universals, cannot support itself. The French Revolution’s proud appeals to reason and equality were quickly followed by the Reign of Terror and Napoleon’s empire-building. The atomized political culture of Weimar Germany led to the National Socialism of Hitler. Lenin’s idealization of small

worker-council Soviets was followed by seventy years of centralized oppression. In each case, the loss of cultural authority eventually caused popular sovereignty to be replaced by various forms of state sovereignty; collectivism eventually undermined the rights of individuals and groups that it set out to protect.

C. Special Revelation: The Bible on Persons and Communities

So far, I have tried to lay out some of the basic problems that emerge if we try to live consistently with the worldview that we are handed by the dominant public culture in the West. In pursuing existential happiness, we end in despair about meaning; in pursuing revelation-free bases for truth claims, we end in nihilism, doubting that truth exists; in pursuing political individualism and atomistic liberty, we end with collectivism and tyranny.

Imagine that we tried developing a different path, the “main line” track that tries to avoid the problems with both scholasticism (faith-trumps-understanding) and modernism (faith-is-irrelevant-to-understanding). If we took special and natural revelation both seriously, leaving the possibility open that they are complementary and both true, what might we learn? I would like to chat through a brief example of the two “lenses” we should be looking through as we attempt this: Biblical theology and systematic/historical theology.

1. *Biblical Theology*

The Scriptures give a rich picture of what it means to live as whole persons in a rightly ordered world.

As many have pointed out, the Scriptures take a very high view of the dignity of the person. We are each given a foundation in God's special revelation for pursuing virtue and acting with sacrificial love toward others, for sensing a duty to make responsible choices, and for the inevitability of bad personal consequences from bad choices. All of creation is normed by God, and we are the primary stewards of that creation. Some of God's norms are mediated through human action, with humans serving as God's delegates, responsible to disclose His creation according to the norms it was meant to follow. This is simply part of being created in God's image.

Yet, the Scriptures teach that we are not *merely* individuals. God is a Trinity of persons, living in perfect community and love. The eternal life of the Godhead, to which humans are called, is a communal life of communication, deference, and joy in creating the space in which others can prosper and find their full meaning. It is a share of this eternal, communal life that God mediates out to humans in the creative work of God's Son. To be created in God's image is to be irreducibly a part of a larger community of human persons; A single person can not fully bear God's image: "Let *us* make *them* in *our* image... It is not good for the man to be alone." To be fully human is to be part of a community, with obligations running in both directions—from individual to group, and from group to individual.

Furthermore, to be human is not just to be part of a single, totalitarian community. In serving as governors of creation, much of the work is done in various councils—families, political parties, neighborhoods, professions, clubs, teams, businesses, unions... a web of councils and communities in which we are to find our place and make our contributions.

Thus the Scriptures' vision of true humanity is one of *virtuous persons living in right community*. The fall—the moral rebellion of persons against the God-given norms meant to establish meaning and joy—has affected humans in the fullest sense, both individual persons and their various communities and institutions. There is corruption of individual persons, and also of the councils, rules and institutions by which humans seek to disclose God's creation. But by God's grace, the Trinity is at work redeeming and restoring this entire full humanity—individual persons, the communities and institutions that they inhabit and embody, and the creation that they together are disclosing.

One Biblical account that richly portrays this vision, in a lovely narrative that puts flesh on these responsibilities and privileges after the fall, is the book of Ruth. In the first chapter, we see a land and a family being emptied by the effects of the fall: First the clouds are emptied of rain, then the fields of their crops, then the land of its families. Naomi's family retreats to Moab in search of food. After her two sons' marriages to Moabite women, the family is emptied of its men: Naomi's sons and husband die. On hearing that crops have again come to Israel, Naomi sets off to return, bitter and hardened. But her daughter-in-law, Ruth, pledges faithfulness to the family and to Israel's God, and returns with Naomi. It is in large part the integrity, determination, and

courage of Ruth (and Naomi's relative Boaz) that turn an emptied, embittered situation into a lush fulfillment of God's promises to his people.

But this is more than the story of heroic individuals who live up to their virtuous potential as persons made in God's image. It is also the story of a community formed, however imperfectly, by the desire to disclose the creation's communal relationships in ways that honor the Triune God. In this particular case, these community norms and practices are grounded in Israel's law.

In Figure Two I have arranged a graphic that will help us to think together about Israel's conception of a right community. One friend calls it "The Gospel According to Dali," and I have to admit it's a bit surrealistic. But it made sense to me to think of this part of Israel's law as a set of institutions that catch and support people when they otherwise might experience a free-fall. Without right community, persons risk a plunge into desperate states that would constitute a denial of our status as God's image bearers.

As the figure indicates, from the beginning several groups were not entitled to land ownership—widows, "strangers" (the non-Hebrew aliens living in Palestine), and Levites. From the time of Abraham, land had been a sign of God's faithfulness to his covenant with his people, and I take it that these three groups were denied literal ownership of land for reasons related to the nature of this covenant, not for overtly discriminatory reasons. We understand, for example, that some "strangers" became quite wealthy, in spite of their lack of ownership of land. Levites were likely barred from land ownership in part because they formed the backbone of the legal system, and would routinely be making judicial decisions about land. And widows, though nominally barred

from land ownership, are covered by the Levirate marriage laws that would normally allow them to remain with their land after loss of spouse. Yet, in an agricultural society, failure to own land might be expected to drive many into deep poverty unless there are some provisions to maintain their place in the community. Without such safeguards, it is likely that many would have been driven into prostitution or chattel slavery (as seems to have often been the case in surrounding nations).

Of course, Israel's law might have relied upon voluntary charity or alms-giving to meet this challenge, but that is apparently not how the God of the Bible thinks. The law, of course, provides for and encourages voluntary charity and the integrity of families in meeting their own needs. And the law, as we shall see, encourages local solutions based on personal relationships; it is generally cautious of centralized power, and Israel's later experiences with monarchy proved the wisdom of these cautions, as land and professions increasingly fell under the control of political cronies. Yet the law is no libertarian document of individual autonomy and private almsgiving. It first provides a "basement floor" beneath which no one is to be allowed to fall. The figure identifies three elements of this floor:

- The triennial tithe: Every three years, all land owners are to bring one-tenth of their harvest to a storehouse, from which allocations to the needy will be made.
- Gleanings and Corners: At harvest time, landowners are to line their harvesters up far enough apart from each other that their hands can not touch. Then the harvesters are to maintain a walking pack while picking the grain. They are not to pause or pick the field clean. When they come to a corner, they are to

“stay in formation” and round off the corner, leaving it unharvested. Then any unlanded or poor in the community are entitled to enter the field and harvest the remaining grain.

- Equal legal access: Every person, landed or not, is to be treated equally before the law. For example, the “eye for an eye” law, which may sound harsh at first to modern ears, is striking in that it *limits* retribution to being no greater than the initial harm, and assigns this limit without reference to the status of the offender. (Other Mesopotamian law, for example, had divided culture into three classes, then assigned punishments that differed according to class. A first-class offender might face a fine of retribution, whereas a third-class person guilty of the same offense might pay with his life.)

Thus justice involves, at a minimum, assuring that all members of the community have access to the resources that will allow them to meet their basic needs, remaining full-fledged members of the community. But there was more to the right ordering of community in Israel. When a landed family suffered a catastrophic loss—say, low rainfalls—they did not enter a free-fall to the basement. Several provisions cushion the impact of catastrophes:

- Israelites are entitled to an interest-free loan of grain from those in the community who are not struggling with this catastrophe.
- If there is insufficient grain in the local community to care for needs through loans, a household may “lease out” the labor of one of the household members for a fixed number of years. The family receives the

income for this labor immediately, when it is needed. (Unfortunately, this practice is often translated “slavery,” but it is clearly not the kind of labor arrangement that westerners have in mind when they hear this word.

Under Israel’s law, the worker may not be forced to do any work the household owner does not do himself; the worker is employed for a fixed period of time, is paid the going wage for this work, and is automatically released at the end of his contract; the householder is even obligated to provide the departing worker with food and gifts to aid him in the journey home and the re-establishment of his life there.)

- Families may also mortgage their home for a specified number of years, presumably moving back into a tent until the contract expires and they repossess their home.

These provisions all assure that those in difficult circumstances will not find themselves pressed into coercive agreements because of their bargaining position. Human beings are not to be treated as if they were just another commodity, fetching whatever price the market will bear. Yet all of the provisions require initiative and integrity, commensurate with ability, on the part of those who find themselves in need--loans must be repaid, work must be completed, changes in housing must be accommodated, fields must be gleaned, and so forth.

Every seven years comes the Sabbatical Year, the date for which all of the loan and labor and mortgage contracts have been written to expire. In the cases of labor and mortgages, there is nothing very spectacular here—the service has been performed for

which people have paid, and everyone is free to go back to life as it had been.

In the case of loans, there is some reason to believe that loans made in recent years, especially the year just before the sabbatical, might be held by families who would still be in difficult situations, and perhaps unable to pay. There is some legitimate uncertainty (so I understand from my friends who read Hebrew) about whether the wording of the laws requires that the loans be forgiven, or merely that re-payment be “released” (one translation of the relevant verb) until the following year, when it would be resumed. My own suspicion is that the law may be ambiguous for a reason. The whole Hebrew law code, meant to govern an entire culture for centuries, consists of just over 600 laws. Rather than an exhaustive modern-style civil law document, I expect these laws were used as guidelines, within which elders of a community would work out an appropriate detailed application as cases arose. Thus, if a family were judged able to make full repayment of a loan in a sabbatical year, I imagine they were expected to. If they were clearly unable to repay in the foreseeable future, it’s likely the loan was forgiven or at least suspended. The law itself seems to assume this flexibility (such as the warning to lenders that they should not withhold a loan simply because it’s the year before a sabbatical and their repayment may potentially be in jeopardy).

The law makes provision for especially severe circumstances in which loans, labor contracts and mortgages may not provide enough support. After exhausting these possibilities, families may also lease out their land, selling a specific number of future harvests for a fair amount that is, at least in principle, all received up-front, when the family needs it because of the crisis. Such land leases are written to expire in the “sabbatical-of-sabbaticals” year, the Jubilee year, which comes every fifty years—that is,

after every seventh sabbatical. Families are not allowed to sell their land in perpetuity, as land is a sign of the covenant and none in the community is to lose their covenant status in Israel. This also means that there is a particular kind of mercy built into the community, in that there are limits on the losses that will be faced by future generations for the catastrophes endured by their parents.

Some have tried to make much of the Jubilee provisions, seeing in them radical and uncompensated redistributions of resources. They may then go on to either encourage equally radical, uncompensated modern transfers, or to argue that these laws could never have been practiced and are best thought of as wishful thinking by law writers long after the events portrayed in the story of Ruth. I keep trying, but I can't see how these views make any sense. Israelites agreed to a contract, selling a specific number of harvests for a fair price. (The law (Leviticus 25) specifically requires a fair-price agreement, which neither burdens the buyer nor the seller. So much for uncompensated redistribution.) When the previously-agreed-to number of harvests had been collected, exhausting the value that the tenants had pre-paid, the contract expired and the original owners got their land back. I don't see that any redistribution is taking place here. The law certainly prohibits driving people into poverty by paying them an unfair price for their land when they are in difficult circumstances, and the law indirectly limits the effects of catastrophes on later generations. The law also presupposes that there is generally fair access to the means for making a basic living before catastrophes occur. But these hardly amount to uncompensated transfers between the parties of the agreement.

Naomi's family had apparently pursued all of these options, including the land

lease. The family was still unable to make ends meet in Palestine, forcing their departure to Moab. When they returned, they still had deed to their land, but were unable to live on it until the next Jubilee. But Ruth takes the initiative, first to know Israel's law, and then to make use of its gleaning provisions. She does so in the fields belonging to Boaz. The story indicates that not all landowners were living by the law—Naomi is delighted that Ruth has found a landowner who will allow her to glean, and Ruth is warned that her safety might not be assured in another's fields. The story, in its delightful yet sober way, makes the point that, after the fall, the pursuit of justice can not be reduced to acts of individual virtue, nor to the pursuit of just social structures. It takes both: virtuous persons, living in rightly ordered community.

The story of Ruth illustrates one final provision within Israel's law: the Kinsman Redeemer, whom we might nickname "The Jubilee Man." In the years after a family has leased out their land but before the next Jubilee, a near relative of means may step up to the legislative plate for the family and repay the remnants of their land contract. This restores the family to their land and, by extension, to their rightful, pre-catastrophic place in the covenant people of God. Boaz becomes the kinsman redeemer of Ruth and Naomi, and in the process becomes an ancestor of King David. And, by no coincidence I am sure, David serves in scripture as a type for the coming Messiah. In Messiah we have the ultimate Kinsman Redeemer, our near relative who pays the debt we could never bear, in order to restore us to our place within the covenants of God.

Some would say that this element of the story of Ruth indicates that the entire narrative is really just a metaphor, an extended visual aid for an essentially spiritual

lesson that does not have anything to do with social policy. The story is just telling us that we are *spiritually* needy, and that God will provide a *spiritual* way out of our problem. By extension the entire law of Israel could be interpreted in this way; it isn't telling us anything about how communities should tend themselves, just pointing out our moral guilt and spiritual need of salvation. I would be happy to stipulate that this is part of the meaning of the story of Ruth and the law in which it takes shape. But surely we cannot stop there in our application of the law and narratives without doing violence to the Bible itself. As I've indicated, the entire thrust of the Bible's account of our situation is that God created humankind to live as a community that images the Trinity in a setting specially constructed for this purpose. When humans marred this image and setting, God set out to restore it. God does so not in the Greek Platonic sense of plucking out souls, one at a time, from a vulgar physical realm to a bodyless existence, but in the Hebrew sense of restoring the entire creation to the wonderful community of meaning that it was intended to be. The Hebrew prophets drive this emphasis home. Their vision for God's intentions in the world obviously includes worship and piety, but also encompasses the practical ways that communities work, especially their care for the poor. And lest anyone think that this message is limited to communities of the faithful, to be spiritualized in the New Testament as only applying to non-material reality, the Prophets teach that God holds all nations accountable for the ways in which they disclose the creation, especially for the treatment of the most marginalized.

ii. Systematic Theology

This mention of "all nations" raises an issue that may have been nagging you for

some time how. It would be one thing to make a convincing social-policy argument from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures to people who are believers. It is quite a different thing to answer the basic question raised by Descartes' descendants: Since not all people agree on what counts as revelation, how can a diverse society learn to live together peacefully in such a way that genuine religious and philosophical differences are faced, understood, and socially accommodated? Modern cultures are not theocracies. Does the argument so far require that they should be? Said differently: Descartes' descendants resolved religious differences by trying to make them irrelevant to public culture. Is there a different way to live together, allowing faith to enter the public square without embracing some form of religious tyranny?

It must be acknowledged that there is more than one Christian tradition on these issues. Some of the most vocal Christian voices in American politics in the last two decades have left the impression that they believe in some form of modern theocracy-- Once a Christian position is worked out on some issue, the next step is to seek the power to enforce this position. These "defenders of the faith" generally portray America as a distinctively Christian nation, which seems to imply little tolerance for pluralism and dissent--the features that attracted many believers to North America in the first place.

But there are other traditions, other Christian voices that influence social policy. I would like to chat through the basics of part of the Reformed Christian tradition. I do this partly because this tradition has had a clear effect on portions of welfare reform in the United States. It is the tradition I'm most familiar with, it tries to consciously give an alternative to modernism's weaknesses, and I also think that many "defenders of the faith" might find in it some of the moderating sensibilities that their own traditions lack.

If time allowed, it would be useful to also talk through Roman Catholic social teaching, which offers a wealth of resources that are in my view complementary to those of the Reformed tradition. But that project must wait for a different time and place.

Though the Reformed tradition can be thought of as a continuity from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures through people like Augustine, Luther and Calvin, the modern branch I'll be discussing comes to us speaking a Dutch accent via Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper's public career in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries spanned several professions--journalist, University founder and president, Prime Minister of the Netherlands, and, initially, theologian and pastor. His life had several important parallels with that of Kant. Both were troubled by the explosive tendencies they saw in modernism, especially as embodied in the French Revolution. Both, upon exposure to modern liberal theology, believed they had "gotten over" their pious upbringings, and began to seek after universals without revelation. But Kuyper made the mistake of becoming a pastor and being assigned to a Dutch congregation. Far from being wowed by the profound insights of liberal theology, his congregation helped tether Kuyper as he found his way back to historic Christianity.

He spent the rest of his life considering how the organization of culture was normed by God. What are God's intentions for arranging the things that produce law and policies? How can faith take its place in public life without dishonoring the integrity of those with different faiths, or with no faith at all?

Let us think by using a simplified model of public culture. Think of culture as three related communities: the state, the church (meaning, of course, religious institutions in general, Christian or otherwise), and civil society, the web of institutions that runs

between the individual and the highest political powers. How should these three elements of culture be arranged? If you were drawing an organizational chart, should there be a hierarchy? If so, which elements dominate the others?

Aristotle argued that membership in the *polis* is morally prior to and more ennobling than membership in other communities. Nationalists, collectivists and many monarchists had similarly argued that *the state* belongs at the top of the organizational chart, with other institutions owing a debt of existence to it. The church might appear as a nearly-co-equal, giving some sense of moral integrity to the operations of the state and nation, or the church might appear as just another element of civil society under the state's direction. This option for organizing culture we might simply call *state sovereignty*.

We could instead advocate what many around the world turn to in reaction to modernism: Believing that God has given revelation to guide the development of culture, and that those who hear this revelation have a responsibility to organize culture as God directs, one could advocate theocracy. Let's call this option *church sovereignty*. The institutions of state and civil society then come under the direction of people who believe they are accepting direction directly from God. As I have indicated, this option is perhaps not as far from some American Christian political activists as one might at first have supposed.

Third, one might react to the modern tendencies to over-emphasize either the individual or the state by wanting to place civil society at the top of the organizational chart. "Civil society" is such a murky construct that, in practice, this populist option tends to absolutize some element or two of civil society and place it at the top of the

pyramid, so that it directs life in the other spheres. These approaches are all variations on the theme of *popular sovereignty*. The dominant institution varies from place to place--unions in some countries, a political party in others, communes or thugs or organized crime elsewhere. America has tendencies toward this model, making "the market" the organizing principle of culture. The state would then march to the market's tune, as politicians would be driven by fundraising and other financial motives; the church would become a message retailer, developing demographic niche markets and targeting its program and message accordingly.

The Kuyperian tradition offers an alternative to these three hierarchical schemes for ordering culture. God creates the whole scope of human civilization, and creates each element of it with intention, directed toward a purpose. Each sphere of culture comes directly from God, and is answerable directly to Him for its actions; none owes a debt of existence to a different sphere. Thus we might set up our organizational chart as a flat, horizontal structure, with spheres living side by side, each holding direct accountability for the way it behaves. In contrast to state sovereignty or church sovereignty or popular sovereignty, Kuyper calls this vision *sphere sovereignty*.

Each sphere has an internal moral order, an integrity, that must be respected. Thus families cease to function properly when they are bent to the moral order of a different sphere--say, the rules of military organizations. The Drill Sergeant Father is a failure at disclosing a family in a normative way. Likewise, churches can not be run as if they were shopping malls, and universities can not be run as if they were political parties. In each case, the sphere ceases to function properly when its internal moral order is not respected.

These internal norms are not fixed and immutable. As the elements of the creation are gradually disclosed, the norms that govern them also develop organically with time. Yet the norms of life are not random occurrences or mere social conveniences. They have a status that transcends individual wills and is ignored to our own harm.

Sphere sovereignty obviously gives us an alternative to modernism's tendency toward political collectivism and totalitarianism. It lowers the state to the level of all the other spheres. But how would this vision protect us from modernism's tendency toward individualism and libertarianism? For Kuyper, the state does have responsibilities toward and in the other spheres. We cannot assume that a just ordering of society will naturally emerge as an obvious part of an undirected social contract. This is the testimony of the Scriptures and of reflective human experience with the natural revelation. Kuyper specifically suggests three areas of responsibility for the state toward the other spheres:

- The state must compel mutual regard for the various spheres and their boundaries when they clash, without taking over the duties of the other spheres. For example, Kuyper advocated the regulation of opening hours of firms, so that the pressure of market forces would not impinge upon the integrity of family life by eroding the time families have together. But this effort by the state is to take the form of indirect regulation; direct state ownership of enterprises would amount to displacing the duties belonging to the commercial sphere of life. Again, Kuyper argues that the church commits an injustice when it compels particular families to be its members, as the state church of his day had done to dissenters. In such cases the state is obliged to intervene, without taking over the church or its functions as a department of the state.

In fact, a “state church” is an oxymoron in this conception of things.

- The state must defend the weak ones within spheres against the abuse of power by others in that sphere. For example, the state should maintain antitrust and business regulation law that prevents the powerful from directing culture to their own ends by silencing others. But the state should do so without becoming a commercial enterprise itself.
- The state is responsible to move all citizens to accept the personal and financial burden of maintaining the natural unity of the state. For example, taxes, including taxes to support incomes of the weak ones in society and provide essential social services, are a natural responsibility of citizenship. Not all income assistance need be funded by private charity, and not all taxes are coercion, as some libertarians might argue. Yet it is likely not appropriate for the state to maintain a monopoly in the *provision* of social services or care for the weak. It is likely that civil society and religious institutions will be more gifted, more trusted, and better positioned than the state to provide these supports to the weak. A state monopoly in the provision of care for the marginalized would overstep the state’s legitimate bounds; even excessive regulation may impose standards on providers that are inappropriate to their callings. The burden of proof is borne by those who would extract the poor from natural civil communities to make them direct dependents of the state. Government should instead strengthen, not replace, the communities through which citizens properly care for each other.

D. Conclusion

I've introduced a Christian tradition that aims to draw on special and natural revelation to propose guidelines for social policy. The guidelines aim to avoid the instabilities associated with modernism, while also accepting the forced humility of pluralism. They also chart a course between the excesses of individualism and collectivism.

But the devil is always in the details. How is a modern, pluralistic culture going to allow its state to fund care for the weak that is provided by civil and religious institutions, while still maintaining real pluralism and not risking the establishment of some religious ideas over others, and while also not encroaching upon the life of the civil and religious institutions it funds? That will be a tall order indeed.

Yet the United States has set out upon an attempt at just such a regime in the 1990s. In the third lecture we will consider this experiment. But first it will be helpful to take a hard look at the natural revelation concerning proper care of the marginalized. In particular, it is time to consider what we can observe about how social policy toward the poor actually works in practice, by reviewing the experience of American poverty policy during the last forty years.

ⁱ I am in debt to a conference paper by XXX for exposure to Calvin's correspondence on usury. I am in debt to my colleague George Monsma for understanding Kuyper's view of the responsibilities of the state to other spheres. Peter Heslam's research on Kuyper helped me understand how he compares to other Continental political philosophy. Parts of my understanding of the general Reformed tradition have been especially shaped by Wolters' Creation Regained. James Bratt's edition of Kuyper's works was helpful reading, especially Kuyper's inaugural lecture as President of the Free University.