The Weight of Community:  
Alasdair MacIntyre, Abraham Kuyper,  
and the Problem of Public Theology in a Liberal Society

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*Of all the countries in the world, America is the one in which the precepts of Descartes are the least studied and best followed.*  
*Alexis de Tocqueville*

**Introduction**

American Christians often assume that because liberal democracies, such as the United States, avoid the extremes of the Constantinian church-state and the totalitarian secular-state, they probably also foster healthy church-state interaction. This article examines the ways in which such societies actually hinder such interaction by preventing churches from engaging in public discourse. Liberal democracies do this because churches, and perhaps all communities, each speak their own language—a fact well illustrated by Garrison Keillor’s stories of life in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota:

The Lutherans of Lake Wobegon were dead set against the new communion between Lutherans and Episcopalians, although some of them (I name no names) have, while visiting their fallen-away children in distant cities, attended Episcopal churches (with the children) and partook of communion. But they don’t want there to be an official link that might, over the years, grow tighter and, before you know it, you’ll find Pastor Ingqvist processing in a dress and a rhinestone-encrusted cape preceded by two guys twirling incense pots on chains like they were yo-yos and go through a lot of bowing and turning and genuflecting. And suddenly the Bible-based sermon of 25 minutes turns into a 6-minute homily about the beauty of flowers. And the Sunday school takes up the infrastructure needs of the inner cities. And soon you realize that your young people are a little shaky on their Bible stories and parables and can’t find Jeremiah or Deuteronomy or even Ephesians without looking up the page number in the index. No, the Lutherans of Lake Wobegon don’t care to go in that direction. Anglicanism
is for when you take a vacation to England. It’s like nightclubbing that way: it’s for special occasions. You don’t want to make a practice of it.\(^1\)

Because communities each speak their own language, attempts to translate between them often result in confusion. Bring incense into some churches and everyone will think you are just twirling some pots around; preach about the beauty of nature and people will think you only care about flowers. It goes both ways: the Episcopalian will find the notion of frequent potluck dinners in the basement of the Lutheran church rather unappealing. Unless these sorts of things are part of your own practicing community, they just do not make sense.\(^2\)

The same dilemma presents itself when the practice in question is politics. How can you possibly expect the general public—a group that includes not only Lutherans and Episcopalians but also atheists, gardeners, and public radio hosts—to understand that the perpetuation of the family farm is important to you and that the reason is not money but that the shared activity of farming is inherently good? Or how can you expect the public to understand that educating your children yourself is important to you, not because of what you teach but because there is an inherent good in teaching and learning together in friendship? You might as well advocate incense in the aisles and potlucks in the basement. The translation from one community to another is just too difficult.

Difficult as it is, it is not impossible. Translation in the realm of politics requires a particular type of institution. This institution must allow people “to engage together in systematic reasoned debate designed to arrive at a rationally well-founded common mind on how to answer questions about the relationship of politics to the claims of rival and alternative ways of life, each with its own conception of the virtues and of the common good.”\(^3\) In other words, this task of translation is only possible given the right resources.

Because this task of translation is so difficult, political systems have developed ways to deal with the problem. The American political system chooses to deal with the problem of translation between particular interests and common interests by restricting what language may be used when addressing the general public. The preferred mode of discourse is that which appeals to an interest

\(^1\) Garrison Keillor, “Post to the Host,” May 2001. Online: www.prairiehome.org/posthost. As is typical of metaphors, it would be a mistake to push this one too far. Technically, Episcopal and Lutheran churches are two communities that engage in a single practice: Christian worship (Alasdair MacIntyre, 6 August 2001, letter to author).

\(^2\) Throughout, community refers to the particular community that embodies a practice; its opposite is society at large, which does not share a single practice. The only exception to this usage is local community, the opposite of which is society as embodied in the nation-state. In this usage, a local community operates only on a small scale and its membership is composed of practicing communities such as churches, sports clubs, and so on.

\(^3\) Alasdair MacIntyre, “Politics, Philosophy, and the Common Good,” The MacIntyre Reader, ed. Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 239.
everyone shares, such as money or safety. Occasionally, this restriction takes the form of explicit prohibitions, but more commonly it is accomplished simply by ignoring language that does not conform or by imposing moral obligations to refrain from such speech. If you mention your interest in preserving your family’s farm, your reasons do not count because they are only your own private interests and are biased by your membership in the farming community.

Countries that deal with the issue of translation by restricting public speech to that which appeals to universal reasons can be termed liberal. Liberal societies choose not to provide the conceptual resources necessary to communicate between practices because such communication is viewed as either useless or dangerous. Properly speaking, of course, liberalism does not see such limits as a choice so much as an epistemological necessity. Only reasoning based on a universal rationality is real reasoning; nonuniversal reasoning is too often an attempt to secure power, is biased, or both. The problem with this, as Nicholas Wolterstorff points out, is that what has rushed in to fill the void [left by restrictions on public discourse] is not noble discussions of justice. . . . For nobody cares about principles of justice thus obtained. What has rushed in to fill the void is mainly considerations of economic self-interest, of privatism, and of nationalism. . . . For people do genuinely care about their own economic well-being, they do genuinely care about protecting their private lives, and many of them do genuinely care about their nation.

This is the problem faced by any particular community that seeks to translate its own reasoning into public discourse, but what about the specific case of religious communities?

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4 One example is Robert Audi, who sees the use of religious discourse in support of public policy as a violation of the moral duties of democratic citizenship. See his Religious Commitment and Secular Reason (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). A recent response to Audi is Paul Weithman, Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Both of these sources provide extensive references for those interested in the debate among philosophers about the legitimacy of excluding certain types of speech in liberal politics. Although Audi does explicitly restrict religious discourse, he would likely deny the claim that this limits the remaining forms of discourse to universal interests such as money and safety. This is because he, largely drawing on John Rawls, is confident in the ability of citizens to develop broad overlapping consensus about political matters so long as exclusively religious discourse is excluded. A more openly secularist vision of liberalism can be found in Richard Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” Journal of Religious Ethics 31 (2003).

5 In this article liberal refers to that political tradition that is commonly said to develop out of the Enlightenment; it never refers to liberal as the opposite of conservative, in the contemporary political sense of the term, nor to theological liberalism.

The task of translating the reasoning of a particular religious community into society-wide interests is commonly called public theology. This task has been going on at least since the first liberal states were established, but the term itself did not appear until 1974 when it was applied to the work of Reinhold Niebuhr.7 Different theologians approach this translation in different ways. Some, such as Niebuhr, prefer to err on the side of making their message understandable for the widest possible audience. They realize that this comes at the expense of their translation being literal—the translation is never quite the same as in the original language—but the payoff of greater comprehension by a greater number justifies the downside. Others, such as Stanley Hauerwas, resist the impulse to translate, deciding that any translation will be so unlike the original that it is more harmful than helpful. Thus, Hauerwas is considered (and considers himself) an opponent of public theology.

In 1981, philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre made a disquieting suggestion: what if the only way to know what is good is by being part of a particular community? Liberal societies assume that reasoning grounded in particular communities is made suspect by that grounding. Therefore, to know what is good involves neutrality and distance. Even at first glance MacIntyre’s proposal has an appeal to it. After all, to know what counts as a good painting, should you ask someone who knows nothing about art (and is therefore neutral) or should you ask someone who has been trained in painting (and therefore already has ideas about what is good and bad painting)? This has profound implications for the task of public theology in liberal societies. If particular interests are required in order to know what is good but only universal interests count, how can society make political decisions about what is good? Because of this insight, MacIntyre’s philosophy is an excellent resource for tackling the problem of public theology.

A common point of criticism of MacIntyre’s work on politics, however, is that it is solely negative. His criticisms of Enlightenment-influenced political theory are incisive, but he provides little by way of alternative. For this reason, it will be helpful to apply his work to a contemporary, constructive political theory. To this end, this article considers the recent appropriation of Abraham Kuyper’s political theory by American evangelicals. Because Kuyper was so politically active during his life, but in a way that thoroughly integrated his Christian faith, many scholars see in him a promising alternative to American Christian politics as usual. This article considers Kuyper as he is presented by John Bolt in *A Free Church, A Holy Nation*. While such an approach is promising in some respects, viewed in the light of MacIntyre’s critique, the evangelical appropriation of Kuyper is seen to fall prey to the common pitfalls of classical liberal politics. The primary goal here is to consider Kuyper as his interpreters, Bolt in this case, present him, thus setting aside questions of whether Bolt’s interpretation of Kuyper is accurate. Nonetheless, a final section of the article considers briefly ways in which Kuyper might be helpful if read more critically.

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This article applies MacIntyre’s philosophy to the task of American public theology as follows. Section 2 develops an original typology for the purpose of both identifying key issues and locating current public theologies within it. This section also includes a brief overview of how this dilemma has played itself out in American history. Section 3 surveys those aspects of MacIntyre’s thought that are most relevant to the task of public theology. Next, Section 4 introduces Bolt’s project of appropriating Kuyper for American politics and applies MacIntyre’s work to particular areas of Bolt’s study. This is followed in section 5 by a brief treatment of whether alternative applications of Kuyper might avoid the pitfalls of approaches such as Bolt’s.

A Brief Theory and History of Public Theology in America

American Public Theology as Medial Interests: A Typology

Because public discourse in liberal society is necessarily narrow, public theologians who seek to translate their theology into publicly comprehensible language must do so by expanding the public’s “linguistic capabilities.” They must increase the range of reasons that are allowed to count in public debate. This is accomplished by introducing some concept that is neither a universal interest nor a particular interest but rather somewhere in between. Such interests can be labeled medial interests. Contemporary American public theologies can be understood as different strategies for increasing the range of medial interests that society permits to be used in public debate. Such theologies can be arranged on a spectrum from minimalist medial interests to maximalist medial interests.

The minimalist end of this spectrum refers to those who want to introduce concepts that are only slightly particular to their community (that is, concepts that are almost universal anyway). Maximalists want to introduce even the most particular concepts (concepts that are more tied to certain theologies). The most influential public theologies also employ the added element of historical antecedent as a strategy for countering the objection that the medial interests they advocate violate American society’s limitations on public speech.

One popular minimalist version claims that in America’s early days citizens were restrained from excessive appeal to universal interests by certain medial interests called habits that helped them balance common good with individualism. This approach is associated most closely with the book Habits of the Heart written by Robert Bellah and others. The liberal objection to introducing these interests into the public’s vocabulary is countered by locating these habits in early nineteenth-century America, a task accomplished by employing Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America. If such interests were a valid part of public discourse then, surely society would be wrong to exclude them today.

Bellah’s approach is more minimalist than those who advocate public recognition of a divine being but make no other explicit theological claims. For this approach, there is much historical basis in the deistic writings of the nation’s founders. Theologians such as David Tracy could be located here because he
is, on his own account, trying to introduce some concepts of his particular community into wider society. However, he is sometimes accused of sacrificing too much particular language.

Slightly less minimalist are groups that advocate family values. Their historical antecedent appeals both to the Puritan morality of colonial New England as well as to the stereotypical nuclear family of the post-World War II period. This public theology is commonly associated with evangelical Christians; however, many evangelicals advocate a more maximalist approach. By appealing to references to God and, in some cases Jesus, in Revolutionary- and Civil War-era discourse, they advocate introducing explicitly Christian interests into wider society. Some also advocate public recognition of the church as an institutional medial interest.

Though not strictly speaking a medial-interests approach, just off the extreme maximalist end of the spectrum lies the theonomism of R. J. Rushdoony and Gary North. This position makes its historical appeal the furthest back of all: the theocracy of pre-exilic Israel. Theonomism is not technically a medial-interests approach because it insists that its interests (the contemporary implementation of the Mosaic law) are in fact universal. In other words, it is not an alternative to the habits-of-the-heart or the family-values movements; it is an alternative to liberal society itself—an alternative that promises infinitely stricter regulation of public speech than does liberalism.

Having developed a typology of American public theologies that interprets them as medial interests, it is important to identify the place of liberal thought in the history of American church-state relations.

James Madison and the Problem of American Public Theology

Ronald Thiemann recounts the following three events in his *Religion in Public Life* as examples of the tension between church and state during the past fifteen years and why this tension seems so irreconcilable:

- In 1986, the Supreme Court sustained a Georgia statute that criminalized sodomy based on the fact that the “condemnation of those practices is firmly rooted in Judeo-Christian moral and ethical standards.” The very next day, a district court ruled that six defendants accused of harboring illegal aliens could not state before the jury their reason for their actions because, the judge ruled, “their actions [were] motivated by religious convictions.”
- New York Governor Mario Cuomo revealed how this dilemma plays itself out in the lives of elected officials when he spoke at the University of Notre Dame. Cuomo declared that as a Catholic he was opposed to abortion, but as a governor he was not.
- In *Allegheny County v. Greater Pittsburgh ACLU*, a Pennsylvania county permitted a Christmas creche scene, a Christmas tree, a menorah, and a sign celebrating liberty to be erected on public property. The ACLU filed suit and various courts responded, their decisions being unified only by their confusion: “The
Federal District Court held that neither [the crèche nor the menorah] violated the first amendment, the Third Circuit Court of Appeals disagreed, holding that both symbols were violations of the establishment clause. The Supreme Court, in a truly Solomonic decision, finally held that the crèche was in violation of the first amendment while the menorah was not.9

Had his book been written later, Thiemann could certainly have included in this list the recent Supreme Court case in which the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools was challenged because of its reference to God. According to Thiemann, dilemmas such as these arise because the Constitution both guarantees free exercise of religion and prohibits its governmental establishment; these examples reflect the conflict between the two. However, the first amendment has not always led to this confusion, and it is upon this fact that Thiemann builds his case for the validity of his public theology.

According to Thiemann, there should, in theory, be no conflict between the clause of the first amendment that guarantees free exercise and the clause that prohibits establishment because both were written by a single author, James Madison, who based both clauses on a single argument. He summarizes Madison as follows:

Having been created by God, human beings have an obligation to return to the Creator the “homage due Him.” Yet that obligation cannot be coerced lest humans deny the very gift of freedom granted them by God. Therefore human beings must determine from “the dictates of their conscience” how and in what manner they will worship the divine. More, since the gift of freedom is divinely granted to all, all human beings stand as equals before their Maker, no matter how diverse their expression of homage may be. Human beings, even in their differences, stand equal before God. Genuine freedom implies diversity; diversity before God entails equality; and equality demands the toleration of the various forms of human worship.10

From Thiemann’s perspective, the significance of Madison’s argument is that it is theological. Thiemann’s approach is to build a public theology that introduces Madison’s limited theological claims into society as medial interests. By doing so, he hopes to overcome “the rampant rise of individualism within our culture [that] threatens to create a radical imbalance between self-interest and common interest.”10 In a move typical of the medial-interests approach, Thiemann discovers values that have a historical antecedent in American political life. He concludes that the current problems arose because America has lost a public place for these values.

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9 Ibid., 72-73.

Although Thiemann does not make explicit use of the habits-of-the-heart language in *Religion in Public Life*, as he did in his earlier *Constructing a Public Theology*, nonetheless he does still seem to be working somewhat from within the habits framework. This school of thought finds its historical antecedent in founders such as Madison but especially in Tocqueville. The America Tocqueville that depicts is one in which the problems of liberalism, such as its excessive individualism and promotion of greed, threaten to undermine the new nation. Thankfully, something like an unofficial civil religion curbs liberalism’s vices and makes the nation, in Tocqueville’s words, “the place where the Christian religion has kept the greatest real power over men’s souls.” The interpretation provided by *Habits of the Heart* and Thiemann is profound and provides insightful critiques of American liberalism. They are also wise to rely on Tocqueville; *Democracy in America* is surely one of the great masterworks of all political writing. However, Bellah and Thiemann are perhaps too optimistic in their conclusion that the habits of Tocqueville’s day might be successfully reintroduced today.

Understanding the current problem as the absence of something that must be reacquired can be helpful but it obscures a larger issue. Emphasizing that Madison’s argument for the first amendment is theological may lead Thiemann away from something more significant. Perhaps the important question is not whether Madison is playing the theologian but whether he is any good at it.

What if it was not failure to practice the habits that caused their disappearance but something in Madison’s theology that systematically excised them from public use? Perhaps in the very paragraph in which Madison seems to be practicing public theology he is putting in motion forces that will later make religious arguments such as his impossible. Madison’s argument runs as follows. Only uncoerced worship fulfills the obligation of honor that humans owe God. To ensure that humans can meet this obligation, the government must ensure free exercise and freedom from establishment. Without these, the manner of worship could not be determined, as it must be according to Madison, by the “dictates of conscience.” This last claim is profoundly problematic.

Madison’s notion of conclusions based solely on the dictates of conscience is tied up with assumptions about individual autonomy and universal rationality that were hallmarks of the liberal politics he helped develop. As described above, liberal societies deal with the problem of translating particular language into public language by downplaying appeals to nonuniversal interests. If MacIntyre is right that “membership in a particular type of moral community . . . is a condition for genuinely rational enquiry,” then the sort of freedom by which Madison believes the conscience must reason is not even theoretically possible. From the perspective of Madison’s argument, every religious object to which the conscience is exposed (such as being born into a particular religious

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tradition or seeing a menorah at city hall or hearing your grade-school classmates say “under God”) appears to be coercive; it appears to unfairly pressure the conscience with biased preconceptions. The result of Madison’s theology is to make persuasion borderline coercion. Therefore, it is perhaps no coincidence that now, just as the philosophy that informed Madison’s notion of a free conscience breathes its last, federal courts cannot rule on the first amendment without contradicting themselves.

Fruit from a Dying Tree

The analysis developed so far is in line with (but not identical to) MacIntyre’s argument in *After Virtue*. He begins that work with a parable:

Imagine that the natural sciences were to suffer the effects of a catastrophe . . . Widespread riots occur, laboratories are burnt down, physicists are lynched, books and instruments are destroyed. Finally a Know-Nothing political movement takes power and successfully abolishes science teaching in schools and universities, imprisoning and executing the remaining scientists. Later still, there is a reaction against this destructive movement and enlightened people seek to revive science, although they have largely forgotten what it was. But all that they possess are fragments: a knowledge of experiments detached from any knowledge of the theoretical context which gave them significance; parts of theories unrelated either to the other bits and pieces of theory or to experiment; instruments whose use has been forgotten; half-chapters from books, single pages from articles, not always fully legible because torn and charred.12

The parable represents what MacIntyre believes has happened to ethics since the Enlightenment. Today, one commonly hears references to virtues, obligations, justice, and so on, but the use of these terms is fragmentary; they have been cut off from their roots. To apply this to American politics, though it appears that religion was able to happily support public life in Tocqueville’s day, the subsequent disappearance of these habits suggests that Tocqueville observed mere fragments, which Madison’s liberalism eventually destroyed.

If the problem lies with the philosophical presuppositions of the liberal tradition itself, medial-interest-based public theologies are a problematic response. The habits they advocate are but fragments of habits, and the founders are themselves responsible for a system that has built into it a mechanism for excising such habits. If this is true, Thiemann may be offering bad advice when he writes, “churches and synagogues have in the past helped to foster those ‘habits of the heart’ that allowed for the development of a civic-minded, public-spirited citizenry. We can do so again.”13 The problem is that to do so again,

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even if possible, may be inadvisable, for the system will simply repeat the elimination of all such habits that has been ongoing since the days of Tocqueville. Madison’s system succeeded once, and it can do so again.

To summarize the above position, current American public theologies attempt to introduce their particular theological values into public discourse by presenting them as medial interests, but Madison’s unattainable standard of the free conscience makes even medial interests suspect. Most public theologians seem unaware that they are using medial interests. Nor do they realize that it is liberalism’s response to the reasoning of particular communities—the response of exclusion—that makes medial interests necessary. If these theologians realized this was occurring, they would see why, even if they are successful at reintroducing a given medial interest here or there, the system will likely exclude it again sometime in the future.

Americans of Tocqueville’s day did possess something that is missing today, but seeking to reacquire what they possessed is futile. That is because liberal society made their habits sterile; unable to perpetuate themselves they disappeared. It is as if the riots of MacIntyre’s parable targeted not scientists but farmers:

Farmhouses are burned to the ground; fruit and grain are left strewn across the streets and fields. Some of it rots quickly, while that left on the tree lasts somewhat longer. For a long time society shows no ill effects. Anyone who is hungry is able to find fruit lying about and, with a little effort, can usually figure out how to harvest what they need. The rioters even begin to congratulate themselves: We were quite right; farmers are unnecessary. Over time reality sets in. Crops die out after their season, and, after several generations, even fruit trees begin to wither. Without proper care, their roots now find nothing but sand, and they stop producing fruit. When the rioters’ great great grandchildren grow hungry, they turn on their own parents: “Why did you eat all the food? If you weren’t such big eaters everything would be fine. All we lack is a little fruit!” What they cannot realize is that they are demanding fruit from a dying tree.

It is vitally important that society’s solution to the problem of religion in public life does not merely provide fruit from a dying tree. If the tension between religion and politics today is due to the poor philosophical soil in which the founders were themselves planted, the only appropriate response is a thoroughgoing philosophical revolution. For such a task, one resource is the revolutionary Aristotelianism of Alasdair MacIntyre.

MacIntyre’s Revolutionary Aristotelianism

By combining MacIntyre’s work and the medial-interests typology, it becomes clear that introducing certain values into the public’s vocabulary is insufficient. A deeper change—a revolutionary one—is required. Of course, the danger in any revolution, and certainly a philosophical one, is that things may always be worse under the new regime. So, when MacIntyre attacks the Enlightenment,
the fear of his critics is that he will bring about the ecumenical tyranny and religious wars that led to the Enlightenment in the first place. The revolution is simply not worth the risk. Robert Wokler describes MacIntyre’s work as boldly conceived and splendidly incautious—indeed profoundly reminiscent in its nature to the Enlightenment Project he holds in such low esteem. In a sense, it might even be described as that Project turned upside down, or back to front, inspired as it is by a deep religious conviction and a profound sense of faith of a kind from which the eighteenth-century sceptical philosophers, themselves missionaries in reserve, endeavored to liberate peoples enthralled by them.14

Wokler goes on to warn of the dire consequences to which MacIntyre’s writings may lead: “The merest hint of theological correctness, like political correctness, is a potentially most dangerous thing. It may kindle the fires of orthodoxy, and eventually fan the flames of heresy and persecution.”15 It turns out that these criticisms are themselves due to an Enlightenment misconception—the belief that the only possible alternative to a neutral state is a tyrannical one.

The Enlightenment Project

MacIntyre summarizes his view of the Enlightenment as follows:

The thinkers of the Enlightenment set out to replace what they took to be discredited traditional and superstitious forms of morality by a kind of secular morality that would be entitled to secure the assent of any rational person. So [among others] Hume, Bentham, Diderot and Kant tried to formulate moral principles to which no adequately reflective rational person could refuse allegiance. The attempt failed. What it bequeathed to its cultural heirs were a set of mutually antagonistic moral stances, each claiming to have achieved this kind of rational justification, but each also disputing this claim on the part of its rivals.16

Because these philosophers sought a single rationality for all people, their definition of reason finds any reasoning that is, for example, distinctively Christian or distinctively Buddhist, necessarily unreasonable.

The main problem with this position—and this is the mistake Wokler and other critics make—is its assumption that “either reason is thus impersonal, universal, and disinterested or it is the unwitting representative of particular interests, masking their drive to power by its false pretenses to neutrality.”17 One can

15 Ibid., 126.
16 Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Claims of After Virtue,” MacIntyre Reader, 70.
17 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions, 59.
see this either-or in Madison’s belief that only worship originating in the dictates of conscience honors God. The problem with Madison’s requirement is that for a person to be free enough to reason, their conscience must be impersonal and disinterested. Yet, how can conscience be understood apart from personality and interests?

MacIntyre claims that these are not the only two available views of reason. Madison, Wokler, and countless others, have been blinded to the existence of a third alternative. This third alternative is “the possibility that reason can only move towards being genuinely universal and impersonal insofar as it is neither neutral nor disinterested, that membership in a particular type of moral community, one from which fundamental dissent has to be excluded, is a condition for genuinely rational enquiry.”

To MacIntyre’s critics, this is the disquieting suggestion. What these critics have lost sight of is the way in which MacIntyre’s third alternative can be implemented without fanning the flames of heresy, as Wokler fears, or coercing worship, as Madison fears. MacIntyre finds this possibility in the virtue-based ethics of Aristotle.

MacIntyre’s Use of Aristotle’s Ethics

For MacIntyre’s purpose, the key concept of Aristotle’s ethics is its notion of telos. The example of the wristwatch is instructive: “If we ask ‘what is the wristwatch for?’ the usual answer is that watches are for timekeeping. To put it more technically, we could say that the purpose or telos of the watch is timekeeping. . . Knowledge of this telos enables us to render judgment against a grossly inaccurate watch as a ‘bad’ watch.”

Comparing an actual watch to its ideal (which keeps time perfectly) is therefore a prerequisite to judgment. These judgments rely on what MacIntyre calls “functional concepts; that is to say, we define both ‘watch’ and ‘farmer’ in terms of the purpose or function which a watch or a farmer are characteristically expected to serve.” This presupposes “that every type of item which it is appropriate to call good or bad—including persons and actions—has, as a matter of fact, some given specific purpose or function.”

Drawing on these concepts, MacIntyre defines Aristotle’s ethics as “the science which is to enable men to understand how they make the transition from . . . man-as-he-happens-to-be [to] man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature.” Notice that this contains three parts and that any one part can only

18 Ibid., 59-60.
20 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 55.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 50.
be understood by reference to the other two: (1) untutored human nature, (2) human nature tutored so as to realize its \textit{telos}, and (3) how to help humans move from (1) to (2). It is the almost complete absence of (2) in Enlightenment philosophy that has led to the collapse of this triangle. By reintroducing these concepts, MacIntyre seeks to provide a basis for ethics that avoids the pitfalls of both the Enlightenment and the religious hatred that led to it.

Because the various “\textit{teloi}” that comprise the goods of human life are functional concepts, they must be embodied in certain social activities that MacIntyre labels practices. A practice can be any social activity ranging from baseball to fishing to Christian worship. The significance of practices is that each embodies a particular vision of what is excellent, as well as commitments about what means are appropriate to achieving that excellence. Therefore, participation in practices demands that they be received as authoritative. In MacIntyre’s words, “to enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them. It is to subject my own attitudes, choices, preferences and tastes to the standards which currently define the practice.”

23 The kind of authority MacIntyre has in mind here is not totalitarian power that a dictator forces on his or her subjects, but the received kind of authority that an apprentice willingly accepts from his or her master. For example, “If, on starting to play baseball, I do not accept that others know better than I when to throw a fast ball and when not, I will never learn to appreciate good pitching let alone to pitch.”

24 MacIntyre’s point is that just as we cannot know whether a pitch is good without knowing something about baseball’s rules and its vision of excellence, we cannot know what is ethically good without a vision of human excellence. Thus, to know what is politically good demands as a prerequisite a vision of political excellence.

One of the main reasons MacIntyre introduces the notion of practice is that it allows him to distinguish between goods that are internal to a practice and those that are external to a practice. While MacIntyre does not apply these categories to discourse, they do parallel the above-mentioned distinction between appealing to the interests of particular communities and appealing to universal interests that everyone shares. The distinction is made clear by one of the most well-known passages in all of MacIntyre’s work, which is worth quoting at length:

Consider the example of a highly intelligent seven-year-old child whom I wish to teach to play chess, although the child has no particular desire to learn the game. The child does however have a very strong desire for candy and little chance of obtaining it. I therefore tell the child that if the child will play chess with me once a week I will give the child 50 cents worth of candy; moreover I tell the child that I will always play in such a way that it will be difficult, but not impossible, for the child to win and that, if the child wins, the

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23 Ibid., 177.
24 Ibid.
child will receive an extra 50 cents worth of candy. Thus motivated, the child plays and plays to win. Notice however that, so long as it is the candy alone which provides the child with a good reason for playing chess, the child has no reason not to cheat and every reason to cheat, provided he or she can do so successfully. But, so we may hope, there will come a time when the child will find in those goods specific to chess, in the achievement of a certain highly particular kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity, a new set of reasons, reasons now not just for winning on a particular occasion, but for trying to excel in whatever way the game of chess demands. Now if the child cheats, he or she will be defeating not me, but himself or herself.

There are thus two kinds of good possibly to be gained by playing chess. On the one hand there are those goods externally and contingently attached to chess-playing and to other practices by the accidents of social circumstance—in the case of the imaginary child candy, in the case of real adults such goods as prestige, status and money. . . . On the other hand there are the goods internal to the practice of chess which cannot be had in any way but by playing chess.25

The distinction between internal and external goods reveals the ethical importance of particular practices. That which is most ethically significant is precisely those goods that are not universal. The distinction also provides the basis for MacIntyre’s definition of virtue. Each practice requires the possession of certain human qualities in order to acquire the internal goods of that practice. It is these qualities that MacIntyre labels virtues. Just as the virtue of being a fast runner allows the football player to achieve the goods internal to football, the virtue of fidelity allows the spouse to achieve the goods internal to marriage.

Several observations about the difference between internal and external goods will be helpful for relating MacIntyre’s work to politics. First, as the chess example makes clear, dishonestly pursuing a practice can provide external, but not internal, goods. Second, on the one hand, external goods tend to be an individual’s property and tend also to be limited, so that the more one has the less there is available for others. On the other hand, “it is characteristic of [internal goods] that their achievement is a good for the whole community who participate in the practice.”26 Third, although external goods are genuinely good, they are sometimes interfered with by virtues; it is never the case that virtues will obstruct the acquisition of internal goods. Fourth, institutions, though vital to practices, are necessarily concerned with external goods. A doctor can acquire the goods internal to the practice of medicine, but the hospital cannot, even though the hospital’s existence is essential to the doctor’s practice. The danger is that the institution’s demand for external goods can subvert

25 Ibid., 175-76.
26 Ibid., 178.
the practice by sacrificing internal for external goods. MacIntyre thus sees the concepts of *telos* and goods internal to practices as markedly absent in post-Enlightenment ethics. Without them, however, ethics is impossible. How does this relate to the practice of politics?

Some Implications of MacIntyre’s Ethics for Liberal Politics

If the Enlightenment demands “the assent of all educated persons to a single substantive conception of rationality,” any claim that rationality is only possible from particular perspectives appears oppressive. Given the above presentation of MacIntyre’s use of Aristotle, it should be clear why Wokler, writing from an Enlightenment perspective, finds MacIntyre so disquieting and why Madison almost surely would as well. By not only writing from within a particular tradition but, worse still, appealing to that tradition for justification, MacIntyre is thought to reveal the danger of his position. As stated above, the Enlightenment perspective ignores the third option between the Enlightenment’s claim that truth is either neutral or a grab for power—the possibility that nonneutral truth claims are not always subversive. To see the validity of MacIntyre’s alternative, especially in relation to political life, it is necessary to see the ways in which Enlightenment politics—liberalism—fails at its own quest for neutrality.

The irony of the above criticisms of MacIntyre is that if they indict MacIntyre, they must also indict the Enlightenment project itself. This is because the Enlightenment, it turns out, is not neutral; it has become its own pseudotradition. MacIntyre writes:

> The project of founding a form of social order in which individuals could emancipate themselves from the contingency and particularity of tradition by appealing to genuine universal, tradition-independent norms was and is the project of modern liberal, individualist society. . . . For in the course of that history liberalism, which began as an appeal to alleged principles of shared rationality against what was felt to be the tyranny of tradition, has itself been transformed into a tradition.

Hence, the claim that reason must be embodied in communities which exclude fundamental dissent terrifies the liberal when it comes from MacIntyre but turns out to be a vital tenet of liberal politics. The modes of discourse deemed acceptable within conventional politics serve to limit the real possibilities available to the average citizen. Most significantly, discourse that is

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27 Two other concepts, which are not treated here, are vital to MacIntyre’s recovery of virtue ethics: narrative and tradition.


30 MacIntyre, “Politics,” 236.
excluded is precisely that discourse that is most essential for making moral judgments: arguments about particular practices and their relationship to virtues and the common good.

What makes this phenomenon so damaging is that the limits are not set by discussion and argument as part of the political system itself but implicitly. As a result,

Questions about the value of ways of life... are excluded from the arenas of political debate and decision making, even though answers to them are delivered by default, since among the effects of modern government decisions is their impact upon different ways of life, an impact that promotes some—the way of life of the fashionably hedonistic consumer, for example—and undermines others.31

At least on this level, liberalism is revealed not to be neutral; its unspoken assumptions must remain as unspoken as possible. Liberalism’s prohibition of debates about first principles is but one example of this. When events such as the civil rights movement and the abortion debate make appeal to first principles unavoidable, “the task of the professionals of political life is to contain and domesticate those issues, so that any political appeal to first principles does not become a philosophical debate about first principles.”32

All of this leads MacIntyre to the conclusion that modern, liberal politics cannot qualify as a practice. Politics should be a practice; it was in ancient Greece, and forms of it have existed even since the demise of the Greek polis. For example, MacIntyre mentions the English manor estates of Jane Austen’s novels as “surrogates for the Greek city-state,” which allowed politics to function as a practice.33 However, without the telos for political life that the polis embodies, authentic politics are impossible. Liberalism holds that society should be neutral with regard to concepts of the good, but questions of ethics, of which political questions are one subset, depend upon concepts of the good in order to be answerable. The dilemma this poses for contemporary Christians is how, and whether, they may rightly practice politics. Christians, it can be assumed, possess at least some vision of what the good life entails, yet American Christians find themselves in a society that relativizes such visions in its quest for neutrality.34 How then are Christians to proceed? One possibility that has recently gained popu-

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31 Ibid., 238.
32 Ibid., 237.
33 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 224.
34 Note that although one can assume that all Christians have some concept of the good life, it is not necessarily the case that all Christians believe their faith embodies a concept of the political good life. For example, a rigid two-kingdoms approach would see Christianity’s claims as applying only to nonpolitical aspects of life. Alternatively, a strong Anabaptist approach would affirm the Christian concept of political good but would see this good as independent from the state’s vision of the good life.
larity is to appropriate the political philosophy of Abraham Kuyper for the American context. The remainder of this article considers the viability of this approach in light of MacIntyre’s critique of liberal politics.

John Bolt’s American Public Theology of Abraham Kuyper

Although MacIntyre’s work provides an analysis of how the Enlightenment has influenced the liberal politics that developed out of it, his claims are primarily negative. If the liberal nation-state is beyond redemption, it is hard to imagine where the politically concerned members of those states could possibly begin. One way of preventing such a fall into pessimism is to apply MacIntyre’s philosophy to an existing, constructive public theology. The constructive alternative for this study will be Abraham Kuyper, whom Richard Mouw introduces as follows:

The Dutch statesman Abraham Kuyper founded two newspapers, a university, a political party, and a denomination. . . . During his career, which lasted from his ordination in the 1860s until his death in 1920, he regularly wrote articles for his newspapers; he taught theology at the Free University; he led his party both as a member of the Dutch Parliament and, for a few years, as prime minister; and he played an active role in the life (and controversies) of the Dutch Reformed churches.35

Kuyper is an apt subject for this study for a variety of reasons. For one, several authors, such as Nicholas Wolterstorff, John Bolt, Charles Colson, Mark Noll, and Richard Mouw, have recently sought to apply his work to the American situation; thus making such a study feasible.36 For another, because Kuyper is most commonly appealed to by evangelicals, this study will make it possible to include the group that has in recent years struggled the most with how to make their religious convictions appropriately political. This article uses Kuyper as he is presented by Bolt’s study, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper’s American Public Theology*. Bolt’s work is the most recent, it is comprehensive and thorough, and he is the most politically conservative of Kuyper’s interpreters.37


37 In addition, there are at least three connections, all of them rather remarkable, between Bolt’s study and MacIntyre: Bolt suggests that Kuyper may be aligned with Leo XIII (the papal hero of MacIntyre’s *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*). Bolt closes his study as MacIntyre closes his *After Virtue* with an appeal to St. Benedict. Bolt presents Kuyper’s political theory as “poetic,” a concept developed by MacIntyre in “Poetry as political philosophy” (*On Modern Poetry*, ed. V. Bell and L. Lerner [Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1988]), 149).
There are two reasons for choosing a conservative interpretation. First, among evangelicals, it is the so-called Religious Right that has been the most controversial and also most vocal. Because, throughout his work, Bolt implicitly equates Christian political action with much of this agenda, it can be taken as a model of typical conservative Christian politics. Yet, because he bases his work on someone who was not an American evangelical, there is the possibility that it can perhaps become something more than typical conservative evangelical politics. For purposes of this study, Bolt’s presentation of Kuyper is taken at face value. This means, and the point cannot be stressed enough, that this is not a study of Kuyper himself but a study of one particular appropriation of him. Though there are perhaps reasons for seeing other interpretations as less colored by a contemporary agenda, part of the value of Bolt’s work is that it is colored. The very way in which he applies Kuyper to his own project is telling for evangelical politics in general. The second reason for choosing a particularly conservative interpretation is that critics often claim that MacIntyre’s philosophy can lead nowhere but to conservative politics. By placing MacIntyre in dialog with a politically conservative theorist, our seeing some of the differences will make MacIntyre’s work more clear.

In the following sections, two particular issues will be examined in depth from a MacIntyrian perspective: Bolt’s and Kuyper’s confidence in the liberty of the American system and Bolt’s use of Kuyper to respond to the so-called culture wars. This is followed by a more general section on Bolt’s appropriation of Kuyper, including reflection on whether alternative readings of Kuyper might be more helpful than Bolt’s.

Kuyper’s Confidence in American Liberty

Kuyper shares the common conservative evangelical assumption that American liberty provides the best possible system for the church to be able to carry out its mission. While this assumption is well founded in many ways, the fact that America provides liberty by means of a liberal democracy prompts the question of whether some of the system’s origins in Enlightenment philosophy pose problems for the church.

It is Kuyper’s emphasis on God’s sovereignty that leads him to declare liberty as the highest political good. Bolt writes that, for Kuyper, “the Calvinist emphasis on the sovereignty of God is the ground of all liberty. Neither the popular sovereignty of the French Revolution nor the state sovereignty of . . . absolute monarchism (or modern socialism!) can fulfill the promise of liberty.”

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38 See Elizabeth Frazer and Nicola Lacey, “MacIntyre, Feminism and the Concept of Practice” in After MacIntyre, 267, 271.

39 John Bolt, A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper’s American Public Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 166.
first reading, Bolt appears to have found a rather MacIntyrian strand in that Kuyper doubts that French popular sovereignty—a liberal system of government—can provide liberty.

MacIntyre and Kuyper agree that those political systems that originated in the Enlightenment are suspect, but they provide vastly different genealogies of the Enlightenment’s descendants. MacIntyre traces the liberal politics of all Western democracies, such as Canada, Great Britain, the United States, France, and so on, to the Enlightenment. Hence, all these systems are subject to the criticisms detailed above. For Kuyper, the French system is a descendent of the Enlightenment but the American is not. He makes this distinction based on the French revolutionaries’ rejection of God. Kuyper writes, “The history of our times starts from the unbelief of the French Revolution” and its “odious shibboleth, ‘No God, no Master.’”40 Rather than seeing the American project as liberal, Kuyper sees it as Calvinist: “As a political name, Calvinism indicates that political movement which has guaranteed the liberty of nations in constitutional statesmanship; first in Holland, then in England, and since the close of the last century in the United States.”41 Bolt extends Kuyper’s genealogy, tracing the Enlightenment’s influence from the French Revolution to the Soviet Union and China.42 Bolt sees the period dominated by the Enlightenment as bracketed by the French Revolution and the fall of the Berlin wall: “With 1789 representing the initial triumph of atheistic, secular, totalitarian, and bloody ideology, 1989, then, represents its pathetic end and the ideological, if not yet fully political, triumph of the American experiment.”43 From MacIntyre’s perspective, these bold claims are troubling.

Bolt’s Kuyperian claim is to be praised because the American and French systems are different, but it is to be criticized because the difference is not that one is liberal and one is not. Here is where the medial-interests typology is so vital. The actual difference lies in the fact that France is more opposed to medial interests that involve religious content. French society is, in general, minimalistic in reference to theological medial interests. The United States tends to be slightly more maximalist. Hence, the contrast between the American “in God we trust” and the French “no God, no Master” is not the contrast between a nonliberal and a liberal society but a contrast between two liberal states, one of which happens to take a more minimalistic attitude toward medial interests.

Bolt’s misunderstanding of America’s relationship to the Enlightenment is common among evangelicals. The assumption is that because the Enlightenment is secular and the American founders were not atheists it fol-

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40 Quoted in Bolt, Free Church, 12-13.
41 Ibid., 158.
42 Bolt, Free Church, 8-9.
43 Ibid., 12.
allows that America must not be of Enlightenment origin. The problem this leads to is that it blinds evangelicals to ways in which the United States is still subject to some of the same pitfalls that France is subject to. A more reasonable claim would be that certain religious influences shaped the sort of liberal politics that developed in America, yet the American system is still liberal. Failure to realize this often causes evangelicals to misinterpret any opposition they face as due to a conspiracy by their political enemies rather than due to the nature of liberal politics. What MacIntyre helps reveal to Bolt is that both maximalist and minimalist liberal societies restrict public theological speech.

The problem with even the most maximalist liberal society is that although it allows medial interests into public discourse, it still severely restricts the use of such interests for political action. As one interpreter of MacIntyre puts it:

[Within liberalism] political agents are depicted as individuals for whom it is incidental that they belong to this or that country, culture or class. Membership in such communities is incidental in the sense that it does not serve as a determinant of any of the considerations that weigh with agents. . . The only reasons that weigh with agents, at least in the political context, are affiliation-free considerations to do with what they individually happen to desire.44

It therefore becomes clear that the exclusion of Christian values is not due to the forces of atheistic communism, socialism, or French populism (as Bolt claims). Nor is the exclusion due to the absence of certain habits (as Bellah claims). Rather such values are excluded because liberalism knows of no other way to provide liberty than by excluding the beliefs of particular communities.

Nowhere is Bolt’s profound confidence in American liberty more visible than when he favorably quotes Herman Melville as writing, “We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world.”45 The obvious irony is that the Ark contained not liberty but law. Could it be that the ark of America also contains not liberty but law? The implication is devastating for Bolt’s and Kuyper’s claim that the American system can provide the liberty needed to practice their faith politically. Because American society tends to be less minimalistic than France, it welcomes membership in particular communities. The problem is that such membership cannot “count” politically if community is weightless.

The Culture Wars as the Chance of a Lifetime

Another aspect of Bolt’s presentation of Kuyper to consider is his climactic chapter, “Ecumenical Jihad.” The notion of an ongoing culture war is of great significance to Bolt’s argument. Just as his confidence in American liberty is

44 Philip Pettit, “Liberal/Communitarian: MacIntyre’s Mesmeric Dichotomy” in After MacIntyre, 179, emphasis added.

45 Bolt, Free Church, 188.
presented by means of a particular historical narrative, so is his belief that America is in the midst of a culture war:

And then came the sixties! After an unrelenting counterculture assault on “Amerika” as an evil empire, a series of Supreme Court decisions that outlawed prayer in schools and removed barriers to pornography and abortion, and the militancy of a sexual revolution that included compulsory sex education in public schools, evangelicals slowly began to wake from their political slumbers. . . . Directing efforts at specific issues such as the Equal Rights amendment, school prayer, creationism, and attempts to legitimate homosexuality, as well as abortion, evangelicals became significant participants in American politics. At stake were the important questions about American cultural and civic identity. Whose America was it—and who decides? 

Surely such disagreement has been the norm of American political life. According to Bolt, what is new today is that “previous cultural conflicts took place within an agreed-upon national mythology—a form of civil religion if you will.” Society now lacks that national mythology. Thus, Bolt’s analysis of the central issue in the culture wars is that “today it is the very foundation that is up for debate. . . . The new conflict [is] rooted in commitments to ‘different and opposing bases of moral authority and the world views that derive from them.’” Although Bolt makes no mention of MacIntyre at this point, he seems to have recognized the source of what MacIntyre calls the shrillness and interminability of contemporary moral debate. It is because society lacks a common basis for rationality.

While MacIntyre could applaud Bolt’s initial analysis; Bolt’s response is very troubling. Because society now lacks a national mythology, Bolt wants to help restore it. He proposes an American civic faith, which he sees as a “nonsectarian response to the sectarian conflict of America’s culture wars”—nonsectarian because it embraces evangelical and Catholic theology. He is careful to emphasize that this is a secondary theology for believers (which comes just about as close as someone can to explicitly labeling his or her tactic a medial interest), though the use of a secondary theology is not in itself the problem. The problem is that all it amounts to is fruit from a dying tree.

Bolt sees no alternatives between a society in which there is a national myth and a society in which reason equals will to power. He labels these alternatives orthodoxy (national myth) and progressivism (will to power): “The cleavages at the heart of the contemporary culture wars are created by. . . the impulses toward orthodoxy and the impulse toward progressivism.”

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46 Ibid., 124-25.
47 Ibid., 357.
48 Ibid., 357.
49 Ibid., 392.
orthodoxy [is] “the commitment on the part of adherents to an external, definable, and transcendent authority,” whereas the progressivist impulse tends to define moral authority “by the spirit of the modern age, a spirit of rationalism and subjectivism.” In his Gifford Lectures, MacIntyre gives these alternatives different names, though the concepts behind the names are similar: “encyclopaedia” (Bolt’s orthodoxy) and “genealogy” (Bolt’s progressivism). On the orthodoxy-encyclopaedia account, moral reasoning cannot exist without “the assent of all educated persons to a single substantive conception of rationality.”

If that is the case, and if orthodoxy-encyclopaedia and progressivism-genealogy are the only available options, Bolt’s logical conclusion is to side with orthodoxy and develop a civic faith so as to recover the national myth. This much is clear. What is not so clear is how Bolt can honestly believe that by advocating “an external, definable, and transcendent authority” he is opposing the Enlightenment.

The problem with Bolt’s response, the creation of a civic faith to replace the now-missing national mythology, is that this is just another medial interest, just another habit of the heart. Even if Bolt makes great strides in advancing his civic faith, there is no reason to think that this national mythology will fare any better than the last. Between the two alternatives of orthodoxy and progressivism that Bolt identifies, MacIntyre would have him see a third alternative.

The third alternative sees the culture wars not as a threat or as a struggle to the death but as the chance of a lifetime. Perhaps small enclaves within liberal society are finally in such a place that they could now talk about their standards of public debate. This is why the culture wars are seemingly so volatile, indeed, why the word war is used to describe what would otherwise be a conversation. The debates that are carried out in the culture wars are precisely those that liberal society tries to exclude and yet, despite all its best efforts, cannot. That is why the culture wars are not themselves conversation about liberalism’s standards of public debate but merely a possible opening for that conversation to begin. What is needed is some sort of constructive alternative; a framework that allows politically concerned Christians to move toward a society that facilitates reasoned debate among communities.

MacIntyre writes of how people must be morally formed in order to participate in such a society. To participate in society without turning discussion about first principles into a war, one must be a certain kind of person. In one of his later books, Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues, he describes the importance of developing the virtue of “just generosity.” Acquiring this virtue is tied to educating one’s dispositions, to transforming one’s desires. From a Christian perspective, this is the perfect opening for the church.

50 Ibid., 357-58.
51 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions, 42.
52 Ibid., 23.
53 MacIntyre, Dependent, 120-21.
Indeed, Christians believe that the church is the only community in which the most important desire can be transformed. Thankfully, the process of transforming desire is well developed in many Christian traditions. MacIntyre himself relies on Catholic tradition and especially on the work of Thomas Aquinas, whose treatment of *misericordia* and *beneficenia* is part of MacIntyre’s development of the concept of just generosity. Most Christian traditions associate this formation with discipleship—the idea that what it means to be a Christian is to apprentice oneself to Jesus and to learn to live like him; to desire the things he desires; and, most of all, to desire his Father. While the church is indispensable for this process, there is one sense in which the church is not enough. The church must not only train its members, it must also as a practicing community be a part of the reasoned debate about the common good. Note that MacIntyre makes this function of the church explicit when he writes that this local community must include “workplaces, schools, *parishes*, sports clubs, trade union branches, adult education classes, and the like.”

If local communities are to be developed in which the common good can be reasoned about, they must meet several requirements. First, they must be small. MacIntyre has in mind examples ranging “from some kinds of ancient city and some kinds of medieval commune to some kinds of modern farming and fishing enterprises—in which social relationships are informed by a shared allegiance to the goods internal to communal practices.” The nation-state is simply too large to facilitate genuine reasoned debate. Second, these communities may exist within liberal societies, though the state may not itself be involved in the community. Third, they must afford expression to political decision-making on all relevant matters. This requires institutionalized forms of deliberation and generally acceptable procedures of decision-making. Fourth, justice must be defined in a way consistent with just generosity: All must contribute according to their ability and receive (so far as possible) according to their genuine need. Fifth, everyone must have a voice in this community. For those incapable, such as the severely handicapped and small children, proxies speak on their behalf.

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54 Ibid., 133, emphasis added.


56 In this way, MacIntyre distinguishes himself from liberalism *and* communitarianism: “Although he is bound to agree with the familiar communitarian claim that the liberal state’s claim to neutrality is fictitious,... MacIntyre is also bound to agree with much of the liberal countercritique of communitarianism [because of its] claim about the morally neutral instrumentality of bureaucratic rationality is fictitious” (Kelvin Knight, “Revolutionary Aristotelianism” in *Contemporary Political Studies 1996*, vol. 2, ed, I. Hampsher-Monk and J. Stanyer (Belfast: Political Studies Association of the UK, 1996)).

57 MacIntyre, *Dependent*, 129-33.
This, too, is the perfect opening for the church to begin political action that is not limited by the constraints of public theology as medial interests. As members of such communities, churches could engage in the task of translation that has so far seemed impossible. As MacIntyre writes, protesters rarely have anyone to talk to but themselves. This is something churches can help remedy. If they begin by genuinely listening to other protesters, perhaps they will find someday soon that they have someone to preach to besides the choir.

Beyond Public Theology

Stepping back from the details and considering Bolt’s position more generally, MacIntyre’s perspective suggests that Bolt overestimates the difference between American and French liberalism. One of the more attractive aspects of Kuyper’s position for American Christians is that his political genealogy makes American politics inherently compatible with orthodox Christianity. Because the nation was founded on theories based in Puritan Calvinism, and not in the atheistic and deistic philosophies of the Enlightenment, redeeming American politics is only a matter of calling the nation back to its roots. This is why Bolt gives such importance to the culture wars. For him, they are not an opportunity for the development of new, as-yet unconceived forms of political discourse but rather a battle between the original theories upon which the nation was founded and enemy ideologies that threaten that foundation. His task for Christians who seek to involve themselves in contemporary American politics is therefore one of recovery.

Such a reading of American political history is not entirely unfounded. From an academic perspective, the most respected argument for the influence of Calvinist Christianity on early American politics is likely Michael Walzer’s *Revolution of the Saints*, which Bolt mentions briefly. To show, however, that Calvinism had some influence on American politics is a far cry from demonstrating that the Enlightenment is not an influence. In fact, the founders’ writings suggest that philosophers such as John Locke were actually by far the dominant source. Locke’s theories appear to have influenced Kuyper as well. In his study of Kuyper’s *Lectures on Calvinism*, Peter Heslam shows that Kuyper failed to distinguish different positions within liberalism. Because Kuyper associated liberalism almost exclusively with its French manifestation, he overlooked ways that he was himself dependent on its noncontinental versions, especially Locke’s. As Heslam points out that while Kuyper rejected social contract as a basis for political authority he was quite Lockean in other respects.

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Kuyper argues that Rousseau did not inform the American founders, which may well be, but the founders certainly were influenced by other Enlightenment thinkers who themselves shared much with Locke. To point out, as Kuyper does, that Benjamin Franklin prayed for wisdom during the Constitutional Convention rather misses the point.60

According to Bolt, Kuyper agrees with philosophers such as Locke and John Stuart Mill in that he advocates full freedom of religion—understood as freedom of private practice and freedom from coercion against conscience. However, he disagrees by also advocating full religious expression in public. He opposes the view that “the public square must be secular, naked of all religious elements.”61 Thus, Kuyper maintained that because civil authority derives its legitimacy from God, it can, for example, legitimately demand that its citizens observe the Sabbath.62 The balance between freedom of public expression and freedom from coercion is a fine one. According to Bolt, Kuyper felt that America had achieved a proper balance in this regard, and he wished Holland could do likewise.63 He mentions as examples of this balance the fact that sessions of Congress and military campaigns are opened with public prayer. The fact that Kuyper appeals to America as a model shows that he assumed that the balance was a stable one, rather than a momentary equilibrium reached as governmentally endorsed religious structures gave way to secular ones.

To their credit, both Bolt and Kuyper realize Jefferson’s debt to Enlightenment philosophy, which they see manifested in his support for the French Revolution. Kuyper explicitly names Jefferson’s support for the French as “the very target of our Calvinistic bullets.”64 For such statements to be compatible with Kuyper’s high praise for the American system, one is forced to see Jefferson as a maverick among the founders—as representing one extreme perspective. Whether this is historically accurate would require additional study, but it does seem suspect. On the issues relevant here, such as the balance between freedom of public religious expression and freedom from religious coercion, Madison, Jefferson, and others do appear to have shared the key assumptions.

Given this background, it is clear what role Bolt thinks Kuyper can play. Kuyper recalls a vision of America in which Sabbath laws were unproblematic,

60 Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Stone Foundation Lectures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), 87. Kuyper also appeals to Alexander Hamilton who argued, against Jefferson, that the French revolutionary government was not continuous with the previous monarchy.

61 Bolt, *Free Church*, 343.

62 Kuyper writes this in the fifth article of his Antirevolutionary Party platform. Quoted in Bolt, *Free Church*, 343.

63 Bolt, *Free Church*, 344.

64 Quoted in Bolt, *Free Church*, 484.
congressional prayer was unquestioned, and public school curriculum was biblically based. For example, Kuyper’s 1848 lecture, “Calvinism: Source and Stronghold of Our Constitutional Liberties,” includes the bold assertion, “Even today the people of the Union bear a clear-cut Christian stamp more than any other nation on earth. This is an undeniable fact. . . . In America a public school without the Bible would be simply unthinkable; Christianity is just too influential for that to happen.”

To Bolt, the fact that the unthinkable has become a reality indicates that something has gone terribly wrong. The nation’s Calvinist, Christian foundation has been replaced by secular philosophy. Bolt wants to use Kuyper to provide evangelicals a new, revitalized approach to politics, but any approach that resorts to blaming “the sixties” can hardly be considered a way out of evangelical politics-as-usual. Recalling the inherent tensions in the founders’ theories described above, to blame the loss of a Christian national mythology on counterculture appears to be naïve.

What this ignores is the possibility that American political theory was, from the very beginning, rooted in secular Enlightenment philosophy. If this is the case, today’s secularism is not a void left by the exclusion of earlier religiousness; rather it is the end product of a process of secularization that began in Enlightenment philosophy and was picked up by American founders such as Madison and Jefferson. The founders, of course, used much religious language—as do many contemporary American politicians—but this should not be taken to mean their political theories were more Calvinist than deist. The understanding of free conscience upon which the Constitution is based leads almost inevitably to public schools without Bibles and the end of mandatory Sabbath observance. Quite simply, Kuyper is engaged in a radically different project than were the American founders. Consequently, so is Bolt. The problem is that Bolt presents Kuyper not as a radical alternative to the American experiment but as a prophet calling his people back to an earlier time.

It is understandable that Kuyper interprets American history as he does. The outward displays of religiosity in America were great in his day. In fact, by comparison to many other nations, American religiosity is great even today. Thus, to anyone who grew up in a nation with an official church, as did Kuyper, it would be perfectly natural to jump to conclusions such as the impossibility of American public schools excluding the Bible. The fact that this exclusion is now so universally and rigorously applied suggests that, contrary to Kuyper’s wishful thinking, America is more like France than it is like Holland. The same could be said about any of the other examples mentioned above, such as the end to mandatory Sabbath observance and the prohibition of religious scenes on public property. In his appropriation of Kuyper, Bolt seeks to deny that America is like France in this way; thus presenting Kuyper’s reading of

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American history as accurate. Perspectives such as MacIntyre’s tell against such a reading. All nations rooted in classical liberalism depend upon the marginalization of the commitments of particular religious communities.

While this calls into question the helpfulness of much of Bolt’s use of Kuyper, it raises a further question. Might a more critical reading of Kuyper allow Bolt’s project to be extended along more profitable lines? Because only a brief response can be offered here, it will have to be left as an open question. Nonetheless, having applied MacIntyre’s philosophy to Bolt’s use of Kuyper, it is possible to at least point in the direction of further use of Kuyper in American politics.

Applying Kuyper’s approach to politics in a way that avoids the pitfalls into which Bolt’s appropriation falls would involve a more critical reading of Kuyper himself and of American history. If the American political system is in fact closer to France than to Kuyper’s Holland, Kuyper’s challenge to American politics is much more radical than he realized. He believed that the American founders’ vision would maintain the proper balance between the freedoms of religious communities and those of individuals. The founders’ vision, extended through history, is seen to share more with Locke and Rousseau than with Calvin and Kuyper. If this is the case, Kuyper’s almost entirely positive comments on the American system, which call America back to its “Calvinist” foundation, grossly overestimated the stability of this foundation. Thus, his work should not be taken as a prophetic call for return to faithfulness but as a prophetic stand against many of the founders’ most deeply held assumptions. Such a critically prophetic strand does exist in Kuyper’s thought, though it is less pronounced than is his praise for the nation. For example, at the outbreak of the First World War, Kuyper wrote a brief yet bold editorial calling on President Wilson to stand against the war, especially against the temptation America faced to profit financially from the war.66 Additionally, the above-mentioned study by Walzer portrays Calvinist politics as being radical, a notion that Wolterstorff appropriates in his own Abraham Kuyper lectures, Until Justice and Peace Embrace. Both of these scholars see Calvinist politics as a way to stand against America’s problematic heritage of classical liberalism.67

A further way that Kuyper can be used to challenge America’s Enlightenment assumptions recalls MacIntyre’s view of reason. According to MacIntyre, the Enlightenment claimed that “either reason is thus impersonal, universal, and disinterested or it is the unwitting representative of particular interests.”68


67 MacIntyre would not be fully satisfied with Walzer’s or Wolterstorff’s political theories, especially Walzer, because of what MacIntyre sees as too great a dependence on the nation-state. Nonetheless, these two scholars do meet MacIntyre’s challenges much more adequately.

68 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions, 59.
In other words, the Enlightenment leaves no room between neutral reason and coercion. This is why, from the perspective of the Supreme Court, merely seeing a religious display is potentially coercive. Discourse either appeals to the objective mind or it appeals to force. What such a dichotomy obscures, according to MacIntyre, is *authentic authority*—not authority that descends into a sheer exercise of power but authority that is accepted in the way that an apprentice accepts the authority of the master. Note that in the opening pages of Kuyper’s most famous address, “Sphere Sovereignty,” he defines sovereignty as a kind of authority with “the right, duty, and the power to break and avenge all resistance to its will.” When Bolt advocates orthodoxy as commitment “to an external, definable, and transcendent authority,” he is grasping for this authentic authority, but what he takes hold of is Enlightenment pure reason. Faithful to Kuyper, he sees the importance of authority, but, following the Enlightenment, he assumes this authority can only be authentic if it is an external and objectively definable national mythology. As MacIntyre has argued, it is precisely insofar as authority is not external that it is authentic. Perhaps Kuyper’s view of reason and authority could be read as being closer to MacIntyre than to Bolt. Perhaps he, too, saw a third way. If so, a more critical reading of his work and of American history could lead to an extension of Bolt’s project that is not subject to the same pitfalls. To put it another way, maybe American Christians could engage themselves in politics without subscribing to the myth that the nation’s founders were conservative Christians untouched by the philosophies of their day. If MacIntyre’s work presents a revolutionary Aristotelianism, might there be such a thing as revolutionary Calvinism or radical Kuyperianism?

Conclusion

The task of public theology is the task that the church faces when it seeks to discuss its particular practices, virtues, and concept of the good outside its own community. Because liberalism seeks to hinder this translation for all particular communities, this task inevitability becomes an attempt to develop medial interests that are, on the one hand, somewhat like a community’s own interests and, on the other hand, somewhat like universal interests not tied to any community. Public theologies employing the medial-interests approach can be placed on a spectrum from minimalist, which advocate interests as universal as possible, to maximalist, which advocate even those interests that are particular to their community. Medial interests usually have a historical antecedent that justifies their inclusion in public discourse.

Because one’s membership in particular communities is not allowed to count outside of that community, in liberal societies community is weightless. For this reason, the most the medial-interests approach can accomplish is to temporarily reintroduce whatever historical concept they advocate, for it will disappear.

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again just as it did the first time around. This is because, within a society such as America, all medial interests, from habits of the heart to family values, are fruit from a dying tree. Given this, the inconsistency of recent Supreme Court decisions is not *in spite of*, but *because of* Madison’s insistence that the state ensure that citizens reason from nothing but the dictates of their conscience.

Churches in America therefore need more than medial-interests-based public theology. They need a revolution of political philosophy. MacIntyre can help in this task. Engaging MacIntyre’s work in dialog with a contemporary public theology reveals how that theology is handicapped by an unwitting reliance on liberalism. First, MacIntyre helps demonstrate why evangelicals should not be surprised when American liberty does not allow them the freedom to bring religious dialog into public because this is simply what liberal societies do. Second, MacIntyre can help evangelicals rethink how to respond to the so-called culture wars. While this phenomenon is due to the lack of a common basis for rationality, the attempt to provide a new national mythology gets the nation nowhere but back where it started. This means the culture wars could be the chance of a lifetime—an opportunity to have that conversation about first principles that liberalism avoids.

MacIntyre believes this conversation can take place in the context of local communities that reason together about the common good. Churches can be part of this process in two ways. First, they can be the place in which individuals are shaped into enquirers into the good of their local community. Second, churches must be participants in these local communities, not only to contribute their own particular concept of the good but also to listen genuinely to other particular communities. Only then will the church, indeed every particular community, be “more than a prisoner of shared prejudices.”

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70 MacIntyre, *Dependent*, 154.