

27TH ANNUAL KUYPER LECTURE

*In Search of the Radical
Middle: Navigating Populism
and Progressivism*

By Hans-Martien ten Napel, Ph.D.
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CENTER FOR
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CPJ's 27th annual Kuyper lecture, **In Search of the Radical Middle: Navigating Populism and Progressivism**, covers themes informed by Kuyper's life and practice.

Speaker and Respondent Bios

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In Search of the Radical Middle: Navigating Populism and Progressivism

by Hans-Martien ten Napel, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Constitutional and Administrative Law at Leiden University

1. Introduction

Thank you, Stephanie, for that kind introduction, and indeed for the invitation to speak tonight. It is an honor and a pleasure to be here, meeting old friends again and making new ones. I am also grateful that the invitation allows me to connect the various strands of my scholarly work over time.

The last time I was on this campus was exactly 25 years ago this year. From June 17 to 20 1999, I attended the Second National Conference of Christians in Political Science. I presented a paper at that conference entitled “The Fall of Christian Democracy in Europe”.

My dissertation, entitled *A Path of Our Own: The Formation of the Christian Democratic Appeal (1952-1980)* (1992), dealt with the complex negotiations between the Dutch Catholic People’s Party, the Anti-Revolutionary Party, and the Christian-Historical Union concerning a possible merger.

Today’s lecture again focuses on a possible “Path of Our Own” for Christian political reflection. In the 1960s and 1970s, this concerned the search for a “radical” middle ground between socialism and (conservative) liberalism. This time, the search is for a “radical middle” between progressivism and populism.

Progressivism, or social liberalism, can be seen as an amalgamation of the former socialism and (conservative) liberalism. That would have been no surprise to Kuyper. He had already distinguished between “[t]hree national types [that] vie for dominance in the bosom of our nation.” In addition to the Roman Catholic and the “Puritan” types, this concerned “the Revolutionary type, whose ideal and type are found in the mode states of the French or German doctrinaires.”

In retrospect, it seems the political supporters of the French Revolution only temporarily split into a liberal current that emphasized more freedom and a socialist current that emphasized more equality.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, liberalism initially seemed to have remained the only significant political current. Indeed, in the battle of ideas with liberalism in recent decades, socialism has largely “shed its ideological feathers”, as a former Labour Party leader in the Netherlands said in 1995. In doing so, it has fallen prone to neoliberalism, which “is primarily used to describe the transformation of society due to market-based reforms.”

Thirty-five years after the fall of the Wall, however, liberalism seems to have changed character because its emphasis is now less on freedom and more on equality. Several years ago, a Leiden colleague of mine suggested that the apparent loser within the revolutionary movement may have emerged as the winner. In his view, social democracy has taken over liberalism from within.

The conclusion is thus warranted that the former supporters of the French Revolution, which had split into liberals and socialists in the middle of the 19th century, have coalesced back into the single current of the early 19th century. An internal struggle occurs within this, as in Christian thought between Catholics and Protestants.

Regardless, it's understandable that opposition to this revolutionary thinking has once again grown among the population. Unlike in Kuyper's time, however, this opposition no longer comes primarily from Christian quarters. For that, the cultural revolution of the 1960s and the surge in secularization it set in motion has now made too deep a mark.

Populism most clearly articulates discontent, and it thus immediately becomes clear that this current can hardly be valued only negatively. After all, a de facto "one-party state" is not ideal from a democratic point of view. At the same time, populism essentially also belongs to what Kuyper called "the Revolutionary type."

David Koyzis, in his book *Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, does not use the term "populism" so much, but it comes close to what he calls "democratism," i.e., democracy not as a structure but as a creed. He speaks of "a belief in the near infallibility of the vox populi-the voice of the people."

Hence, the title of this lecture: "In Search of the Radical Middle: Navigating Populism and Progressivism." After this introduction, I'd first like to further clarify the challenges of both progressivism and populism before outlining a possible direction for a solution.

The name "Radical Middle" is not only the title of a collection of explorations of postliberalism that I co-edited in 2021. It may also, as I hope to make plausible, serve as a contemporary label for the neo-Calvinist pursuit of public justice, especially if, more emphatically than in the past, government promotion of the common good becomes an integral part of it.

2. Problem analysis

Meanwhile, the title of my 1999 paper mentioned above, "The Fall of Christian Democracy in Europe," referred to a book published three years earlier, entitled *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe*. The concluding sentence of my paper read, "If the analysis presented in this paper is correct, it probably will not be long until it is followed by a study of the fall of Christian Democracy in Europe."

Though I don't dare to claim that I possess predictive powers, it should be noted that at the time of the presentation in 1999, the Dutch Christian Democratic Appeal still held 29 out of 150 seats in the Dutch House of Representatives. That was five fewer than in 1994 when the party suffered a historic loss of 20 seats and fell from 54 to 34, resulting in the first cabinet without the participation of Christian parties since 1918. Now in 2024, only five seats remain of the 29 seats the Christian Democratic Appeal held in 1999.

So, I was curious as to what had prompted my pessimistic analysis 25 years ago. It turns out to have been "the lack of conviction which characterizes both its [that is, of European Christian Democracy] current leadership and its electorate." On the European level at the time, this manifested itself, for example, in the strategy of "openness" pursued by the European People's Party (EPP) toward Conservative parties in EU member states in which no authentic Christian Democratic party existed.

I contrasted this lack of conviction with, as his biographer George Puchinger had convincingly demonstrated, the central event in Kuyper's life being his "conversion" to orthodox Protestantism. In his first Stone lecture entitled "Calvinism a Life-System," Kuyper argued that:

"Two life systems are wrestling with one another in mortal combat. Modernism is bound to build a world of its own from the data of the natural man, and to construct man himself from the data of nature; while, on the other hand, all those who reverently bend the knee to Christ and worship Him as the Son of the living God, and God himself, are bent upon saving the 'Christian Heritage.' This is the struggle in America, and this also, is the struggle for principles in which my own country is engaged, and in which I myself have been spending all my energy for nearly forty years."

The principle of sphere sovereignty played an essential role in this struggle. It was described by him as the principle "that the family, the business, science, art and so forth are all social spheres, which do not owe their existence to the state, and which do not derive the law of their life from the superiority of the state, but obey a high authority within their own bosom, an authority which rules, by the grace of God, just as the sovereignty of the state does."

As Peter Heslam rightly noted, this principle of sphere sovereignty provided "the rationale for social and political pluralism, which was Kuyper's answer to the liberal domination of politics."

This "principled pluralism," especially since the constitutional reform of 1917 that included the financial equality of public and private education, has been the prevailing model of church-state relations in the Netherlands for the better part of the 20th century. As Stanley W. Carlson-Thies wrote,

"By the 1930s, state policy for dealing with the multiple fundamental convictions of how private and public activities ought to be carried out had been transformed."

Equality of treatment no longer was understood to require the state to ignore *philosophical* differences, but rather to embrace them. (...) The liberal public order had been transformed into what we might call a pluriform public order, with rules and structures designed to incorporate the array of fundamental convictions even into the very services for which the state assumed responsibility.”

By 1999, however, this pluriform public order was again under considerable pressure. At least, that’s what I argued during the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, which took place from September 2 to 5 of that year in Atlanta. I presented a paper on “the changing relationship between church and state in Europe”.

My audience included the late Stephen V. Monsma, whom I visibly disappointed. He had published a comparative book on “the challenge of pluralism” two years earlier. One of his motives for writing the book was to present to Americans the Dutch model of principled pluralism as an alternative to the strict separation of church and state.

However, I argued that as international interest in it was growing – as evidenced by the book and the case law of the U.S. Supreme Court, among other things – it had unmistakably passed its peak in the Netherlands. The American model was taking its place.

Once again, I don’t want to suggest that I possess predictive powers – nevertheless, a dissertation titled *From Liberty to Equality*, defended at the University of Amsterdam on March 8 of this year, is worth mentioning. It demonstrates, as the title suggests, that:

“[h]istorically, equality, in various forms, has increasingly influenced the relationship between church and state in the Netherlands. Parliamentary debates on the General Equal Treatment Act (Awgb) in 1985, 1993, and 2014 illustrate how parties are compelled to reason within a framework of equality. (...) Even parties that were once staunch opponents of the [General Equal Treatment Act], such as the Reformatory Political Federation (RPF) and the Reformed Political Alliance (GPV) - later merged into the Christian Union - and the Political Reformed Party (SGP), are being swept along in this tide of equality thinking.”

Some explanation is required here. After all, principled pluralism, as we saw, has precisely “equality of treatment” at stake. This recent thesis, however, is concerned with the “modern” form of egalitarian thinking, as Kuyper would say, which threatens social and political pluralism. Thus, to a certain extent, we’re back in the liberal public order of the 19th century, against the background of which Kuyper had developed his doctrine of sphere sovereignty.

Todd Huizinga, currently Senior Fellow for Europe at the Religious Freedom Institute, has made a connection between the “totalitarian” tendencies he, together with Polish Catholic postliberal

Ryszard Legutko and others, perceives in contemporary liberal democracy and Kuyper's great Dutch predecessor, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801–1876).

Legutko has lived under “hard” totalitarianism, so he knows what that means. Nevertheless, he regards “soft” totalitarianism as totalitarianism as well. Here, I'll briefly summarize Legutko's book on “totalitarian temptations in free societies” in Huizinga's words for clarity: “Like communism, contemporary Western liberal democracy (especially in Western Europe) is about transforming the world; it is progressive. It is animated by the fight ‘against the forces of backwardness’ and a rejection of the commitments of ‘religion, social morality and tradition.’”

Next, Huizinga quotes Groen himself, whose central thesis is outlined in Lecture VIII of his 1847 book *Unbelief and Revolution*, where he writes:

“The Revolution, with its variety of schools of thought and its successive historical manifestations, is the consequence, the application, the unfolding of unbelief. (...) *atheism* in religion and *radicalism* in politics are not only *not* the exaggeration, misuses or distortion, but in fact the consistent and faithful application, of a principle which sets aside the God of Revelation in favor of the supremacy of Reason. (...) where unbelief is free to run its natural course in religion and politics, it cannot but lead to the most radical doctrines.”

In response to this quote, Huizinga says: “Though the term would not be used until the 1920s, a half-century after Groen's death, what Groen calls radicalism or absolutism is, in fact, totalitarianism.” Moreover, “In describing the totalitarian impetus of liberal democracy in the European Union and its member states, Legutko carries Groen's thought into the twenty-first century. And he is proving to be as prophetic as Groen.”

To support this striking assertion, Huizinga then cites Legutko himself when the latter writes that:

“Everything that exists in society must become liberal-democratic over time and be imbued with the spirit of the system. (...) Not only should the state and the economy be liberal, democratic, or liberal-democratic, but the entire society as well, including ethics and mores, family, churches, schools, universities, community organizations, culture and human sentiments and aspirations. The people, structures, thoughts that exist outside the liberal-democratic pattern are deemed outdated, backward-looking, useless, but at the same time extremely dangerous as preserving the remnants of the old authoritarianisms. (...) As a result, liberal democracy has become an all-permeating system.”

As you see, this is the very opposite of sphere sovereignty. Like Groen, Legutko seeks the cause of this totalitarian or, at least, “totalizing”, tendency of liberal democracy in “unbelief”. Moreover, those who believe that this phenomenon occurs only in Europe will be deceived: “Legutko's description of atheist liberal democracy in Europe is an increasingly apt characterization of American democracy as well (...).”

As noted earlier, it is hardly surprising and, on the contrary, encouraging that opposition to this arises. Nor is it surprising, given the cultural revolution of the 1960s, that this opposition is taking a different form than that of Kuyper in the 19th century. In a time of “unbelief,” it would explain the resurgence of populism, although the differences in style between Kuyper and contemporary populism should not be overestimated.

This opposition does not focus on church-state relations, like the neo-Calvinist opposition of the past. The principled pluralism does not square well with the populist emphasis on the unity of the imaginary “people,” who oppose the equally imaginary, hostile “elite.” This is already an important reason to also keep a distance from populism.

Moreover, as I argued elsewhere, social and political pluralism can be considered a prerequisite for a thriving and resilient constitutional democracy. Consequently, populism is as much a threat to it as progressivism.

That said, populism can provide a healthy counterbalance to progressivism in other areas—perhaps primarily in the socioeconomic field, where progressivism, as we have already seen, has fallen under the spell of neoliberalism in recent decades.

Liberalism in general, and neoliberalism in particular, is characterized by its view that, as Koyzis concisely puts it, “[t]here is (...) no common good.” That logically leads to the idea of a “*spiritually vacant state*,” which, of course, gives the liberal ideology a religious character of its own.

Gabriel van den Brink, Professor of Philosophy at the Free University in Amsterdam, said in an interview on March 13 of this year: “Our civilization is under pressure, for it is based on a balance of power, market, and morality. For decades, there was a liberal policy that was only about the market and power. Secularization discredited the morality of policy: that was private, for Sundays, you do that at home.”

In an analysis consistent with this diagnosis, the chairman of the Social and Economic Council and former director of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research, Kim Putters, who, in his capacity as a so-called “informateur” in February and March of this year, examined the possibilities of forming a new cabinet in the Netherlands, writes that:

“different groups of citizens (not only people in vulnerable positions) are experiencing a greater distance from the political system. (...) For some time, the political and social debate has discussed the (persistent) differences between groups of citizens. (...) Differences have always existed between people, and in a democracy, there is room for diversity. However, if those differences lead to deficits in disposable income, education, access to social networks, housing, and health, this can reinforce (perceived) injustice and

polarization. More and more people now no longer see the government as part of the solution to problems, but rather as their cause.”

Overall, there is thus a crisis of authority or legitimacy. Populism is the symptom rather than the cause of the crisis. This also means that attempts to make democracy more “resilient,” for example, by systematically excluding populist parties from government cooperation or banning them, will not help.

Instead, these attempts exacerbate the legitimacy crisis insofar as voters vote for these parties precisely to express their dissatisfaction. Moreover, when it comes to cultural issues, such as gender, immigration, climate change, and Europe, these parties regularly offer welcome corrections to progressive positions.

Yet, the confusing part of the situation is that populist parties, in turn, can reinforce the legitimacy crisis through their sometimes unconstitutional views. In a recent contribution, I characterized claims made after the Dutch 2017 House of Representatives elections, in which the right-wing populist Party for Freedom still finished second, that Dutch democracy is in “better shape than ever” as “dancing on the deck of the Titanic”. Geert Wilders’ Party for Freedom is now the largest party by far.

The critical question, then, is what can be done to prevent Western democracy from definitively becoming “a sinking ship” and what Christian, and in particular neo-Calvinist, political reflection can contribute to this.

3. Direction for a solution

The good news is that no serious doubt exists as to the direction for a solution: to strengthen the acceptability of governmental action, we must together regain a notion of what the common good holds in the present and then further it. This can end the unwholesome polarization in which two groups stand or believe they stand against each other.

Given the cultural development that has taken place, the good news is also that this is not an exclusively Christian notion. Throughout history, the criterion for distinguishing good from bad political regimes has been whether they advanced the common good. That determined legitimacy, so – if we are to restore it – we must work on that as well.

This idea has, of course, been around since Aristotle. It received further impetus under the influence of Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274), who lived well before the Reformation and can be regarded as “The Common Doctor.” For Aquinas, a law was “an ordinance of reason for the common good, promulgated by a public authority who has charge of the community.”

Recently, the notion of the common good has been returned to more frequently. For example, Oxford constitutional theorist Benjamin Barber writes in Aristotelian fashion about the purpose of the state being “to promote the well-being of all citizens, not just a portion of them.”

In his book *Common Good Constitutionalism: Recovering the Classical Legal Tradition* (2022), Harvard Professor of Constitutional Law Adrian Vermeule advocates a paradigm shift in replacing liberal constitutionalism with common good constitutionalism.

Some authors associate that with authoritarianism or even fascism, but there is no reason for that at all based on this book. It is a postliberal book, not an integralist one, since it instructs the state to promote earthly general welfare and not eternal salvation.

On the contrary, there is much to be said for a paradigm shift, or “regime change”, as liberal constitutionalism, consistent with what Legutko has argued, is becoming increasingly coercive.

For example, two leading public lawyers recently claimed that “[p]rotection of gender equality, reproductive freedoms, LGBTQ rights, and the right to die with dignity are considered some of the hallmarks of the current liberal constitutional-rights jurisprudence.” Any system that does not recognize all these rights then quickly becomes unconstitutional.

A more relevant discussion is how the state’s responsibility to promote the common good relates to the core Protestant concept of the state’s role, namely public justice. Traditionally, the principle of sphere sovereignty mentioned earlier has been central to this. In his 2017 Kuyper Lecture, Dr. Charles Glenn deemed revitalization necessary in the age of Trump.

It is crucial to avoid caricatures. For example, it would be entirely incorrect to argue that in Catholic social teaching, in which the promotion of the common good is central, this task would belong exclusively to the state. Conversely, it is equally wrong to think that Protestants have no regard for the promotion of the common good or see no role for the state in it.

However, it is notable that Nicholas Wolterstorff, when he devoted his Paul B. Henry Lecture here in 2022 to “Hallmarks of Christian Political Activity in the Tradition of Reformed Protestantism,” made virtually no reference to the common good. Questioned on this by Paul Weithman, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, Wolterstorff admitted that what he said about it “was brief and unemphatic, easily overlooked.” He continued:

“Maybe the idea is there in neo-Calvinism without the term. Consider Kuyper’s idea of sphere sovereignty: is that not a particular ‘take’ on the common good? Different from Weithman’s, certainly; but if it is not a ‘take’ on the common good, what is it? Politics, says Weithman, ‘should aim at making conditions of temporal flourishing available.’ Kuyper argued at length that a condition of temporal flourishing is that activity in one social sphere does not dominate activity in another.”

However, that is an example of circular reasoning. After all, the common good becomes virtually synonymous with sphere sovereignty.

The thesis I want to defend today is that the role of government in promoting the common good should become a more prominent part of the neo-Calvinist concept of public justice. Dr. Glenn indicated in his Kuyper lecture that he sees the “administrative state” as a threat to pluralism. After all, the government, as Kuyper also stressed, can emanate an urge for uniformity.

That is true because the administrative state is driven by a progressive ethos. However, what if a more “radical middle” inspired, “nonideological” ethos were to take its place? Moreover, it is not easy to imagine that our current significant challenges can be adequately addressed without an essential, more than classically liberal, role for the state.

James Skillen rightly wrote as early as 1990 that “[t]he political order performs a public integrating function and not merely a protective differentiating function for individuals and institutions in society. Therefore, a political order is a commonwealth, a political community. (...) The task of government is to guard the ‘commons,’ to uphold the commonwealth.”

Jonathan Chaplin, in his book on *Herman Dooyeweerd: Christian Philosopher of State and Civil Society* (2011), has an interesting tenth chapter entitled “An Active, Limited State.” In it, he proposes “an important clarification” of the meaning of public justice that “opens the door to a fruitful interchange with the Catholic notion of the common good”. However, this argument is too complex to present in brief and requires expertise. That contrasts with Catholic social teaching, which has no obscure parts.

In the Netherlands, the discussion about where the center of gravity in promoting the common good should lie was conducted within Christian Democracy after the merger party came into being. Similar discussions are occurring within the originally Protestant Christian Union, which has become more open to Catholic social teaching in recent years.

The issue is thorny, which is illustrated by the fact that these discussions have not been able to stem the decline of the Christian Democratic Appeal and, more recently, the Christian Union. Key to this has been an insufficiently critical eye for the influence of progressivism, as defined above, on their stances regarding gender, immigration, climate change, and Europe, not concerning the state’s responsibility to promote the common good.

As mentioned earlier, a search for the “radical middle” between populism and progressivism. is anything but sectarian. Thus, thanks to what Kuyper calls “common grace,” freedom and equality need by no means be jettisoned entirely. As G.K. Chesterton wrote, “The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone.”

Philosopher Gabriel van den Brink, himself a former “convinced Marxist,” speaks of “the topicality of the archaic.” He believes that “modernity has exploded in our faces”: “Modernity thought that the archaic had disappeared. People think it is backward to practice religion, xenophobia seems unfounded, and some want to decide for themselves what their gender is. In the West, the remnants from all those ancient layers of man’s nature are misunderstood.”

The remedy of the “radical middle” in neo-Calvinist circles amounts to a reversal of order: from public justice in the form of sphere sovereignty, in the hope that it indirectly promotes the common good, to public justice in the form of more direct advancement of the common good by government, subject to sphere sovereignty. That is public justice 2.0.

Whether this can be done is not a question. After all, it was done by European Christian democracy in the first decades after World War II. That is why classical Christian democracy is held up as a model by contemporary British postliberals such as Labour Peer Maurice Glasman, Conservative MP Danny Kruger, and Professor of Political Science at the University of Kent Adrian Pabst.

The question of whether Christian democracy can be imported from Europe is also being raised in the United States. For example, one could think of the American Solidarity Party, where postliberals Patrick Deneen and Susannah Black Roberts are among the advisers.

Within classical Christian democracy, there has always been room for “pro-welfare policies,” although Protestant parties did indeed initially struggle with this.

Furthermore, what is needed to prevent it from having a unifying effect is to reconnect the application and exercise of rights more closely to the idea of the common good. That way, the natural rights of religious freedom, expression, and association would regain their rightful place. The principles of subsidiarity and solidarity will then do the rest.

Finally, for the search for a radical middle between populism and progressivism to succeed, the common good must regain its central place in the various forms of international cooperation. That means standing up for both the natural and the social environment. Pope Francis calls this an “integral ecology.” Only in this way will both national and international legal orders be able to regain and deserve legitimacy.

Response by Ruth Melkonian-Hoover, Ph.D.
Political Science Professor at Gordon College

Thank you, Stephanie, for inviting me and thank you Dr. ten Napel for your presentation!

I appreciate your excellent overview of the decline of Christian democracy in Europe, the growing polarization between progressives and populists in Europe and the US, and the need for a new radical middle that prioritizes the common good by government, subject to sphere sovereignty. Much good work to consider and engage here. My remarks and questions reveal that I am not a political philosopher but a political scientist, one who's studied these questions in the US and Latin America. I will note now that I recognize I am asking too many questions; please pick and choose as you see fit.

Let me start with a question about your overarching thesis that I'm sure many of us have (even when we hold to hope!): You foresaw the decline of Christian Democracy in Europe, and laid out some of the external factors leading to such; would those same factors or variables not thwart a renewed US or European efforts toward the radical middle? There may be a middle in the population of the US, for example that is silent, or exhausted, and may be amenable to your proposal, but aren't many of them checked out, fed up with the rabid rhetoric of the far left and far right? (e.g., see research of the More in Common organization)

And a definitional concern: you discuss progressivism and populism as if polar opposites. However, in Latin America, the region is rife with left-wing progressive populists – leaders like the Castros in Cuba, Chavez in Venez, Ortega in Nic, Lula in Brazil, Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, etc. Are you solely referencing right-wing populism in this work? And in the North, we have plenty of leftist anti-internationalist populists who fear global cooperation and multinational corporations.

Liberalism

Staying with Latin America: You are understandably critical of the tendency of progressive liberalism to subsume governance, society, etc. However, again, thinking of Latin America, as Peter Berger and others have noted (he changing opinion on this markedly). Yet, unlike those who presumed liberalism's secularizing tendencies, haven't liberalism and modernity married quite nicely with faith and tradition in Latin America, leading to increased space of religious pluralism, and notably the rise of Pentecostalism? Could liberalism continue to be reformed to be more pluralism friendly? And offering equality of treatment for all, as you note, and much needed checks and balances?

As for spheres outside of governance, I also wonder if liberalism is as overweening as you suggest – e.g., are families forced to have children be equal to parents in responsibility and authority in the Western world? Yes, there have been shifts, some of them good, in children's rights, yet parents are still presumed to be guardians of children, and held to account when neglectful, etc.

Populism

You note populism is problematic on many fronts but highlight that it at least is pushing back against totalitarian tendencies of progressivism, and pressing for a diversity of viewpoints, or at least inclusion of its viewpoints. Yet as you note, it has anti-constitutional tendencies: that is something that is growing on the far left in the US (folks concerned that the constitution is irrevocably tainted given the racism of its time) and the far right (folks not happy about the limits of liberalism, or the diminishment of its majority culture and religion).

You do not emphasize the intersection of religion and populism. And the politicization of religion. What do you think of the arguments of Tobias Cremer (The Godless Crusade) and that of others that populism in Europe (while often more LGBTQ friendly and at times more secular than populism in the US) yet like populism in the US has a tendency to use Christianity as an identity marker, a veneer (not as its moral foundation), “believing without belonging”? I want to reference this as it has implications for religion as a foundation for your solutions, given the problematic association of religion with populism on both continents. This leads to a tendency to dismiss/reduce a range of efforts to bring religion into public life as simply part of a Christian populist and/or nationalist movement.

Solution:

It is easy to critique the state of our world, but difficult to offer solutions in these times. So thank you for laying some out! In your conclusion, you do call for international cooperation and leadership and reference the pope’s encyclical on the environment. This prompts me to ask, do you think the Catholic Church of today and Pope Francis are helpful examples of the radical middle – equipoised, as Alan Hertzke says, between tradition and modernity?

I like your reference to the example of the American Solidarity Party, a new Christian Democratic Party in the US (I admit I was unfamiliar with it – it is fairly new (incorporated in 2016) and has had localized success, understandably beginning with winning some seats in local government and on school boards. Can you offer comparable examples in Europe or others in the US? In particular, what is a very specific and practical example of a government policy/behavior that will look different under public justice 2.0 than it did under 1.0?

Could you expand on the role of the state in advancing the common good? Similar to Charles Glenn’s concerns, I worry about places like Singapore where the state has determined what is the common good and how spheres will enforce it. Does your approach offer enough protection for minorities and dissenters? And yet I concur that some advocates of principled pluralism have given the state short shrift – and as you note, its role in public justice is crucial.

So thank you for your work in pushing out these ideas and complicating the landscape. And thanks to the Center for Public Justice for its role in tangibly undertaking and prioritizing much of this work already within American civil society.

Response by David Koyzis, Ph.D.
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I want to start by affirming that, based on this address, I believe that Prof. ten Napel and I are very much kindred spirits. We both find our roots in the neo-Calvinist movement in his homeland and stand in the anti-revolutionary tradition of Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper. Moreover, I sympathize with ten Napel's effort to reclaim a "radical middle." I have sometimes described myself, tongue in cheek, as a fanatical moderate, perhaps an appropriate label for a citizen of a country that once had a Progressive Conservative Party at the federal level.

Given my American birth, I have continuing concerns about the political health of the United States. I have lived in Canada for nearly four decades. But when our family has traveled to the States in recent years, I cannot escape the feeling that we are spending time in an increasingly foreign country. It is not the same country I left behind. Everything changes of course, and not all change represents decline or loss. Nevertheless, the political culture in the United States has not noticeably improved during my absence and may have deteriorated. I have noticed five major developments:

1. increased political polarization;
2. a decline in respect for ordinary political institutions and procedures within which our representatives can air their differences;
3. one party's seeming support for a demagogue's ambitions over the rule of law;
4. the other party's apparent willingness to buy into a quasi-Marxist division of society into oppressors and oppressed; and
5. the relative absence of the sorts of Christian legislators in the two chambers of Congress whom I so admired in my youth.

The polarization in Congress in particular threatens its ability to act at all, much less to legislate for the good of the country as a whole. Of course, there has always been opposition between the two major parties, and this partisanship is one of the checks that is supposed to prevent leaders from accumulating too much power in their own hands. In Canada and other Westminster democracies we have a long tradition of government and opposition, whereby the opposition parties perform a crucial monitoring role to keep the government in line. There is, of course, no government and opposition in the United States; nevertheless Republicans and Democrats historically functioned as checks on each other, even as they respected each other as valued colleagues. I don't believe it's an overstatement to observe that this mutual respect across partisan lines has declined to the point of nearly paralyzing Congress.

Much of this polarization has been perpetuated by a dangerously dysfunctional dance between progressivism and populism. Progressivism is a composite ideology borrowing elements of liberalism, socialism, [democratism](#), and sometimes even nationalism. It aims at transforming society for the purpose of reaching a particular goal—often liberty, equality, diversity, or

inclusion—and is generally disinclined to tolerate those with more nuanced understandings of the relationship between principles and goals. Even those, such as the late British political scientist [Sir Bernard Crick](#), who insist that politics modestly attempts to conciliate diversity peacefully, are likely to be dismissed by the most hardened progressives as insufficiently dedicated to the single-minded pursuit of whatever overriding goal they have fastened onto. Moreover, progressives have a habit of constantly moving the goalposts, and then effectively excommunicating from their ranks those former progressives unable to go along with the latest addition to the progressive agenda. As the 18th-century Genevan journalist Jacques Mallet du Pan famously put it, “like Saturn, the revolution devours her children.”

Progressives claim to know where history is going and thus bring into the political arena an unwarranted assumption that history is on their side, often labelling their opponents as retrogressive—or bigoted, benighted, [deplorable](#), or another negative epithet—without seeing the need to engage them in discussion over their latest proposals. In this respect, progressives tend towards dogmatism rather than openness to conversation with their opponents. At the moment, the current progressive dogmatism revolves largely around what I have called the choice-enhancement state, or the conviction that freedom of choice is a good in itself irrespective of the substantive content of people's choices. [Charles Taylor](#) and others have called this expressive individualism, which progressives identify altogether too closely with the protection of basic human rights.

[Populism](#) has its roots in the United States at the end of the 19th century when James B. Weaver stood for the presidency with the People's Party to protect the interests of southern and western farmers. Although the original Populists made a series of demands intended to break the power of eastern moneyed interests, more recent populists have capitalized on popular discontent with urban elites, which they identify with an educated class of affluent globalists willing to sell out the interests of the broad masses of their own fellow citizens for the sake of members of their own class in other countries. Much as Marx proclaimed that the working man has no country, so the global elite have no country, feeling equally at home in London, Paris, Toronto, Chicago, Tokyo, and Singapore. Now populism itself is a global phenomenon, manifesting itself, not only in Donald Trump's radically altered Republican Party, but also in Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary, Jair Bolsonaro's Social Liberal Party in Brazil, Mateusz Morawiecki's Law and Justice Party in Poland, and Geert Wilders' Partij voor de Vrijheid in the Netherlands.

Populism is less concerned with abstract principles of justice than with appealing to the resentments of a particular demographic that feels itself to have lost out to the country's globalizing elites. A common theme in all populist movements is a fear of immigrants whose arrival might destabilize society and who might take jobs away from the native born. Populists tend to favour traditional religions, even if they themselves are not very devout. They suspect the reviled elites of being disloyal to the country and of ignoring the interests of the ordinary folk like themselves. In declining industrial towns of the American rust belt, people have seen their jobs exported overseas and feel left behind by a globalized economy. These very conditions make

populists uniquely vulnerable to would-be strong men promising to restore their country's greatness and to bring back the now vanished prosperity that they or their parents or grandparents once enjoyed. Ironically, like Marx and his followers, populists also tend to divide their societies between oppressors and oppressed, obviously placing themselves in the latter category.

These developments make me sympathetic with ten Napel's search for an alternative to progressivism and populism. But whether radical middle—or my own vaunted fanatical moderatism—is an appropriate label I have reason to doubt. I would suggest that, rather than trying to find a path between progressivism and populism, we need to locate norms that will enable us both to work to protect the multiple agents of a pluriform society and to get along with our fellow citizens in the midst of basic disagreements. We need above all to demonstrate our allegiance to the rule of law. We need to recommit ourselves to upholding and maintaining our common political institutions, which, after all, provide the context in which we can deliberate about matters of shared concern. We need to commit ourselves to listening as much as to talking. We need finally to make our preferred policy proposals with conviction but also with modesty, recognizing that our political opponents may have insights which deserve to be heard and considered.