28TH ANNUAL KUYPER LECTURE

The Afternoon of Democracy: How Faith Can Save Government of, by, and for the People

By Gert-Jan Segers

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CENTER FOR PUBLIC JUSTICE

The Center for Public Justice

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The Kuyper Lecture

The Center for Public Justice's annual Kuyper Lecture is named for Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), an influential Dutch scholar-statesman whose many contributions to public life influence Christians today. Kuyper believed that the Christian life cannot be confined to church life. Accepting Christ's claim of authority over the entire world, he sought to follow the implications of that faith into politics, journalism, the university, and other human endeavors.

CPJ's 28th annual Kuyper lecture, **The Afternoon of Democracy: How Faith Can Save Government of, by, and for the Peopl**e, covers themes informed by Kuyper's life and practice.

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Speaker and Respondent Bios

Gert-Jan Segers (1969) studied Political Science at University of Leiden and International Relations at SAIS-Johns Hopkins in Washington DC. He worked as a staffer in the Dutch parliament, then journalist, founder and director of a Christian Study Center in Cairo-Egypt (200-2007), director of the Think Tank of a Dutch Christian political party (ChristianUnion), before starting a political career in The Hague (2012-2023) and becoming a Member of Parliament, party leader of ChristianUnion and member of the Dutch coalition government. Gert-Jan Segers published multiple books, including two novels. He is married with three daughters.

Chris Seiple, Ph.D., began operating at the intersection of religion & realpolitik in 2003, when he became president of the Institute for Global Engagement, and founded The Review of Faith & International Affairs. He has practiced relational diplomacy throughout Eurasia, Africa & the Middle East. He played a significant role in the removal of Vietnam from the U.S. State Department's religious freedom violations list (2007), and later Uzbekistan (2019), about which he developed a theory of change. He has served as senior advisor to the U.S. Secretary of State, chairing the religion and foreign affairs working group (2011-2013), and as senior advisor to USAID, regarding the U.S. government's first-ever summit on Strategic Religious Engagement (2020). He is co-editor of The Routledge Handbooks on Religion & Security, and Religious Literacy, Pluralism & Global Engagement, and a co-creator of The Dialogue of Declarations. He is a senior fellow at Love Your Neighbor Community and the University of Haifa. He previously advised the Templeton Religion Trust in the creation of the Covenantal Pluralism Initiative.

Stephanie Summers is the CEO of the Center for Public Justice. Ms. Summers is a co-author with *Washington Post* columnist Michael J. Gerson and Katie Thompson of *Unleashing Opportunity: Why Escaping Poverty Requires a Shared Vision of Justice* (Falls City Press). A frequent speaker and moderator, recent topics include Christian activism in *Reformed Public Theology (Baker Academic)* and leadership in *The Routledge Handbook of Religious Literacy, Pluralism, and Global Engagement* (Routledge). Ms. Summers is a recipient of the inaugural Duke Divinity Reflective Leadership Award. She received her M.S. in Nonprofit Management from Eastern University. Prior to her appointment at the Center for Public Justice, she spent 12 years with the CCO, where her roles included Vice President for the Eastern Region and Vice President for Organizational Development. Ms. Summers began her career in nonprofit administration as executive director of The Open Door, a church-based youth center in Pittsburgh, PA.

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The Afternoon of Democracy: How Faith Can Save Government of, by, and for the People *by Gert-Jan Segers, Dutch Politician and Writer*

Distinguished guests, Members of Congress, congressional staffers, friends of CPJ, ladies and gentlemen,

I do realize that I am from a rather small country, less than 50% of the size of Virginia and with fewer people than in the State of NY. I know.

But I hope you do realize that without that small country called The Netherlands we wouldn't be here.

My old home town Leiden hosted the pilgrim fathers for a couple of years, before they sailed to the new world. We started building New Amsterdam before—for some strange reason—it was called New York. And of course without one of our political leaders called Abraham Kuyper, we wouldn't have a Kuyper Lecture. **In other words, you're welcome**!

I know that you are having some political issues right now, like a shutdown of the government that made us move to this place. But I will stay out of your political challenges and I would like to take you on a journey to the old world of Europe and to The Netherlands in particular. To the land of Abraham Kuyper, great theologian, statesman and leader of the Dutch Christian Reformed community a little over a century ago. And my guess is that we might discover that we have more in common than we thought.

I hope that—at least—you will be able to make your application for your own American context.

For almost two decades, I gave my best efforts to a political movement that works in Kuyper's tradition—as director of a think tank, as a Member of Parliament and as party leader. That brought us, and me personally, twice into the governing coalition of our country: a coalition of four very different parties, led by the current NATO Secretary General, Mark Rutte.

And if you think I look a bit old for my age, those years are the reason. Doing politics in coalitions with both Christian and liberal parties, in a society that is becoming ever more polarized is quite a challenge.

Small as we are, we always have had **deep differences.**
My parents grew up in a village of lovely tulips but with an invisible, high wall between Protestants and Catholics.
Both had their own churches,
Their own schools, grocery shops, soccer clubs, political parties
And never the twain met.

The only difference with Northern-Ireland was a political culture of plurality and freedom to live and let live. But in real life, there was very little love between both communities.

My father who would become a protestant pastor and his neighbour who would become the Catholic archbishop were not allowed to play with each other.

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At the end of his life the archbishop told me that every evening, he was praying for me as a political leader. A very moving moment.

But as protestants and catholics became much more friendly to each other, we now face new deep divisions.
Secular – religious
Right – left
Native Dutch – Dutch with a migration background
City – country side
Rich – poor
People with academic education – and people with practical education

With our system of proportional representation many groups have a voice in parliament, with now 12 different parties being represented. And the more parties we have, the deeper the cultural and political divisions we have, the louder MP's are screaming the less our system is able to come up with an agreement or decisive compromise.

Since my departure from politics, things have not gotten any better – and I am not suggesting that there is a direct link between my leaving and the decline of democracy.

But the title of this lecture is not a fun one.

The title of this lecture is: The Afternoon of Democracy.

In this Kuyper Lecture I want to show you that we are living in the afternoon of democracy – but also to ask what our calling is in this afternoon, and how we can look forward to a new morning.

The image of the "afternoon" I borrow from the **Czech priest and author Tomáš Halík**, who writes about the Afternoon of Christianity. And I believe the two are deeply connected.

There is, first of all, a link between the morning and the noon of Christianity and the acceptance of fundamental freedoms in Europe. The influence of faith in Jesus Christ was the fertile soil from which the rule of law sprouted and democracy flourished.

In our lands the conviction took root that we are all created in the image of God. That the individual counts. That in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free. In part because of this, we in the West came to the deep conviction that all are equal before the law. That is not a state of nature – look around the world today – but goes back to a profound conviction. If you will, to faith.

The relationship between Christian faith and democracy and freedom is also evident in the United States.

The Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville observed: "For the Americans, the idea of Christianity and liberty are so completely mingled that it is almost impossible to get them to conceive of one without the other."

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The contemporary British historian **Tom Holland** was not yet a Christian when he was surprised to discover that he was much more Christian than he had thought. He found that Western culture holds fundamentally different values from other and earlier civilizations.

For **Julius Caesar**, the number of enemy civilians and soldiers killed was a sign of strength. The more deaths, the greater the victory. But the longer the Christian faith worked in the minds and hearts of Europeans, the more our measure of strength changed. We still waged wars, but our moral judgment of them and our standards for them changed. And the violation of those standards—such as the Holocaust—became recognized as a mark of deep shame and guilt.

Tom Holland shows that our values, our moral intuitions, have their particular character because our culture was shaped by the morning and noon of Christianity.

But even though Tom Holland himself eventually became a Christian, Christianity itself in Europe—and in my country—has been weakened by decades of secularization. As a student and as an MP, I was often asked why I am *still* a Christian. It looks like there are new hopes for faith and church among the youngest generations in Europe, but there are good reasons why Tomas Halik speaks about the afternoon of Christianity.

And there are clear signs that a similar process is taking place with Democracy. **The government by, of and for the people**, with free elections, with the rule of law and equal freedoms and rights for not only the majority that rules but also the minority that lost.

In the **morning** the sun rises, the birds start singing, flowers open to the sun, and the world comes alive.
In the **early afternoon** the sun is at its strongest, and the world runs at full speed.
But in the **afternoon** the sun begins to lose its strength, people grow tired, nature prepares itself for evening and night, when all becomes dark and sometimes even threatening.
Our democracy was born in the morning and flourished at noon, when we even thought that history had ended and there was no alternative to the democratic rule of law. But now we are experiencing the **afternoon of democracy**.

With tired politicians.
With a lack of inspiration, of new and unifying ideas.
With growing division and lacking ability to meet each other in the middle.
With a lack of moral and inspiring leadership.
And in Europe, with a lot of technocratic politics that no longer knows how to inspire.

This is not the sadness of a former politician who thinks that after his departure everything only went downhill. No, it is a sober and at the same time troubling observation.

I want to point to three signs of our time. Three writings on the wall that tell us that we are in the afternoon of democracy.

1. **Western politicians and people are losing the ability to cooperate.**
   In this world, Europe is a beacon of freedom and democracy. Within Europe, the Netherlands has long been a model of reasonableness and stability.

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Our democratic rule of law is a unique political system that on the one hand allows for wide differences and on the other hand has the capacity to reach a broad, fully democratic, consensus.

What this requires is the ability to consult, to give and take, to cooperate.

In the Netherlands, that ability has been highly developed. If we don't work together and find common ground, our dikes will crumble and half our country will be flooded by the rivers and the sea.

Even if we don't like each other, as the protestants and catholics in my parents village weren't very excited about each other, we organized ourselves, respected others, our leaders sat around the table and came up with a way to live and let live.

This ability to cooperate has brought social peace and economic prosperity to The Netherlands.

The Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville also looked on in the first half of the 19th century in amazement when he saw how Americans formed associations for practically everything and invested themselves collectively in their society.

But this ability is under pressure throughout Europe. In Europe, irreconcilable extremes are becoming stronger so that majority governments can only be created if a wider range of centrist parties swallow their differences and come together in a coalition. But then becoming even less attractive to more and more voters. Centrist parties are being driven into each other's arms, where they risk dying. Coalition governments are becoming increasingly fragile, and elections are becoming more frequent.

In **the Netherlands**:

- Since 2010, we would normally have had three national elections by now; this Fall we'll have the sixth since 2010.
- In the past five years, our national coalition governments have more often been caretakers than governing coalitions with new, distinct policies.
- In society, the number of strikes has doubled.

In **France**, President Macron's political center is being crushed between the far left – including even communist parties – and the far right, which could win the next Presidential elections. Every difficult government decision to curb public spending leads to strikes.

In **the UK**, there is a Labour government that has already lost its credibility within a year, and the traditional two-party system dominated by Labor and the Tories, is giving way to multiple new parties with much more radical views, both on the right and the left.

In **Germany**, the political center almost died, and the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats barely managed to form a majority government. But the far-right AfD is growing by the day.

There is one issue, one main concern that is causing the old parties to crumble and the populist right to rise, and that is immigration.

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And of course, every Western society faces the destructive consequences of social media.

With stirring tweets and posts from the extremes, compromise in the political center is increasingly attacked—from both right and left—not as a sign of civilization, but as a sign of weakness and betrayal of ideals.

Sometimes it feels as if we are living in the Weimar Republic. As you might know, that was the German democracy that ended in 1933.

2. **Western democracies are losing the ability to pursue strategic policies**

The second sign of the times is that in our democracies, we are busier with tweets and scandals than with the major strategic choices for the future.

Immigration is dividing European countries, creating deep division and still—with maybe the exception of Denmark—no member state of the EU and also the EU as a whole is able to manage immigration. A clear sign of political weakness.

Another example of this weakness is **our energy policy**. One of the largest and most consequential strategic choices Europe has recently made is to produce its own clean energy in the future. A big, bold choice, but with poor implementation.

At the moment, China invests more than twice as much in its energy security as the European Union.

For the energy of tomorrow, 20 minerals are of crucial importance. Of those 20 critical minerals, China dominates the processing of 19, with an average market share of 70%. And for 12 of the 20, China has restricted exports.

Meanwhile, Western politicians attack each other with childish tweets, while China has control over the supply lines of nearly all critical minerals. The energy supply of democratic Europe now depends on the goodwill of the world's largest and most powerful autocracy.

In short, major strategic decisions and long-term strategic policies—like managing immigration and energy policy—are increasingly beyond the scope of European democracies.

3. **There is worldwide decline of democracy**

This is the third sign on the wall.

Democracy in our time is less a sign of freedom and civilization, and increasingly seems a recipe for division and weakness.

Democracy is losing attractiveness. That is the third sign of the times.

Earlier this year, Freedom House, the authoritative U.S. organization, published its annual assessment of global freedom, covering both civil and political liberties—freedom under the rule of law and freedom in democracy.

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- For the 19th consecutive year, there has been a decline of freedom.
- 60 countries show deterioration in freedom and democracy, versus only 34 countries showing improvement.
- Only 20% of the world population lives in a free country.
- For the first time in 20 years, there are more autocratic countries (91) than free, democratic countries (88).

These are signs of the times, signs that we are experiencing the afternoon of democracy. And that it is beginning to dim.

Saving Democracy—Faith as a Foundation

Now what? Can our democracy be saved?

If we ask ourselves whether democracy can still be saved, that suggests we treat democracy as an end in itself.

Defenders of democracy often defend our political system like a group of scribes and Pharisees. Loving rules, not people.

I assume that many voters—even knowing there are no easy solutions—will more likely vote for a politician who takes their concerns seriously than for a politician who tells them why the proposed solution is impossible or not allowed.

I am a defender of the democratic rule of law.

As a Christian and as a citizen I agree with Francis Fukuyama, a professor that lectured me in this town 18 years ago. He wrote that there is no sustainable or moral alternative to our democracy. Maybe he was too optimistic when he wrote his famous 'End of History', but I share his conviction about the value of democracy and the rule of law.

In Russia, anyone with an independent opinion can fall out of a window.
In China, the state has assumed a godlike position, squeezing all freedom and creativity out of society.
In Iran, gay people are hung from cranes, Christian pastors are imprisoned, and women without headscarves languish in jails.

These are not real alternatives to the personal and political freedom we enjoy.

Our democratic rule of law best reflects who we truly are:
creative, responsible people, made in the image of God, with the ability to cooperate, the freedom to do good, and the freedom to make foolish choices. It is the freedom God gives us.

But I do not believe we save democracy by acting like a group of scribes, guarding the letter of the democratic rulebook.

Democracy is not an end in itself, but a means to work together for a just and free society.

In defending democracy, democracy must be practiced, not preached.

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President Lincoln once spoke of democracy as “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” Democracy began close to the people, but for many voters it is no longer theirs; too often, it belongs to judges, treaties, or a government far away.

If we want to save our democracy and freedom, it must once again belong to citizens. “Of the people.” With associations that Alexis de Tocqueville once admired about the US.
With a civil society, where people shape their own neighborhoods.
With democracy close, with local control over local public funds.
With a big society where richer people really care for their neighbours.
Where privileged people fight for a brighter future for children with less privileges.

You cultivate a democratic ethos not by preaching about democracy, but by practicing democracy and doing society.

Faith Alone Can Save Us

Yet the question remains whether this is enough in practice.
Because democracy also depends on pre-political moral conditions:

- Acceptance of authority
- Care for neighbors
- Respect for people with different opinions
- Appreciation of community
- Morality on which laws are based
- Ideals and visions that can be pursued within a democracy

So yes, you must practice democracy, but you also need a bit of faith. Not faith in the letter of the democratic rulebook, but in the purpose of democracy.

The **German political scientist Hartmut Rosa** recently wrote the book ‘Democracy Needs Religion’. He emphasizes that democracy needs communities, ethos, values. That democracy needs religion.

The problem with this observation is that it treats religion, faith, and ultimately God very functionally. But no one believes something just because it is useful or needed. You only believe something if you think it is true.

God does not return because we could use Him. We return to God only if we believe He can save us.

Christians do not hope in Jesus because He keeps things together here. Christians hope in Him because He speaks the words of eternal life.

Therefore, Christian faith can only save us if we also want to be saved.

This summer I read a book by one of our great poets, about her serious illness from which she will not recover. She writes how she concluded that her atheism was inadequate for what she was going through. She then had an intense experience that made her believe God exists.

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I think we may reach a similar point in the afternoon of Western democracy. That we see our democracy, our rules, are now insufficient. That we cannot manage it alone. That we are too divided, too polarized, too hostile toward each other. And that we must call on God.

As a Christian, I see the first signs of a continent rediscovering its Christian roots.

The Gen Z generation in Europe is the first youngest generation in a century to be more religious than the generation before it.

Europe versus the U.S.

Now, some of you might be thinking critically: a man from Europe, far more secularized than the U.S., is telling Americans that they need faith. That they even need God.

And perhaps some want to shout at me now: "We have far too much faith here! Far too much God in politics!"

You are right. There are stadiums full of faith. Senators praying in the middle of the Senate floor. Earlier this year, an inauguration had more praying clergy than speaking politicians.

In both cases—Europe, where a new desire for God is emerging, and the U.S., where God has always had a central role—faith alone is not enough. Equally important is good theology.

Abraham Kuyper deeply believed in the truth of the Gospel. As far as he was concerned, not all roads lead to Rome. For him, Jesus was the way, the truth and life. He even broke away from our national Protestant Church, because major parts of the Church were his eyes too liberal.

But that is—as he called it— the sphere of the Church. In which it is all about truth.

At the same time, he was politically fighting against the idea that the government should be imposing truth. In the own sphere of government, it is not about the truth of particular faith, but about justice and freedom for all.

He fought for room to be different. While believing in the uniqueness of Christ, he fought for pluralism in which his religious and political opponents had the same rights and freedoms as he wanted to have for his own Reformed community. He fought for freedom of education with equal treatment between public schools and Christian schools. And he won.

His good public theology has shaped our nation. Good theology makes the distinction between what is of God and what is of Caesar.

Good theology focuses on a Christ-centered Church and a political system in which everyone has the freedom to believe and not to believe, with justice for all.
As God makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on all.

As convinced as you can be about Christian truth, good theology teaches us not to use the means of government to make our nation more Christian or to fight for 'our God', or against religions and convictions that are different from ours. Or to punish your opponents because they have the wrong ideas.

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Peter once took the sword to defend Christ, but he was wrong. Christ taught us that his Kingdom is not of this world.

Yes, democracy needs faith, but also a clear understanding of good public theology with the right place for faith and politics.

As Christians, we can stand up for freedom, pluralism, a legal framework in which also we ourselves have the freedom to be a witness of Christ.

In Conclusion

Ultimately, it also depends on ourselves. Not only whether God is present in our divided and polarized societies, but whether we are present.

Are we spectators in a weary civilization that knows evening has come and night is approaching? Or are we doing whatever we can while there is still light?

In the beautiful movie **Des Hommes et des Dieux**, that is the big question for the monks in an Algerian monastery, in a country torn apart in the 1990s by civil war between islamic extremists and an authoritarian government. Should we leave, or should we stay?

The threat grew, from islamic extremists and from the army. It became darker, more fearful. When the abbot asked at the final vote who wanted to stay, hands went up one by one. Not because the monks were heroes, but because they believed they had to remain faithful to the place where God had brought them. They were martyred, but are still a great example of Christian faithfulness and true love.

And so we too can do what we can. As good citizens of our country, who know where our democracy comes from and what it is for. Not as spectators, but as actors. While it is still day.

And even when night comes, sooner or later, a new morning will break again.

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Response by Chris Seiple, Ph.D.

President Emeritus, Institute for Global Engagement

My name is Chris. I'm a Christian. I want to say I'm very grateful for Gert-Jan's remarks, and I keep thinking about several things. One is Winston Churchill: "Democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others." And we're in one of those moments where we have to decide what we mean. I very much appreciate this idea of a realistic assessment. I hope you did not hear any pessimism in that talk—it was realistic and therefore optimistic. You can't get anywhere, practically, unless you're realistic first.

I also appreciate the "signs of the times." It made me think of Matthew 12. Jesus is talking to the Pharisees and says, "You want signs of the times? Well, I'll give you the sign of Jonah." Which can be read in a way as sacred comedy, because the only "good Jews" in the book of Jonah are the Gentiles, who demonstrate what it means to be obedient before a sovereign God. And of course, the book of Jonah is what is being read today in synagogues around the world for Yom Kippur. And the attack on the synagogue in the UK is the realism that we're talking about.

So, three meta-comments, maybe, and then I'll yield the floor. One is that attack in England. I hope you take away the fact that what he's talking about is not just there or here. These are global trends. There is a trend of religious nationalism, which is defined by the hubris of generally the majority ethno-religious group against "the other." It is not faithful patriotism and faithful pluralism—which is what I think you heard here—defined by humility and awe before the Creator, the uncreated Creator of the world.

And so these trends are not going away. In fact, they're quite dangerous. "Afternoon" is the right word: the clouds of Mordor darken. And they darken not just here, and not just in the Netherlands. My second thought, thinking about this—and it's a good reminder for Christians at least—is that we worship a global God. Sometimes Christians who are in politics (whatever your party or country) get caught up in your own thing—your own political party, your own country. And we forget that the original global NGO is the church. We have a citizenship to our nation, but a global citizenship too, all in the name of the kingdom—if you're a Christian.

And that's something to think about. I root that in my own reading of Paul—"a Hebrew of Hebrews" (Philippians 3), yet also a Roman citizen—civis Romanus sum—"I appeal to Caesar" (Acts 25). And then, of course, he is "an ambassador in chains" (2 Corinthians 5; Ephesians 6). The national and the global citizenship are gifts to be stewarded pursuant to the kingdom citizenship. And, by the way, I think other faiths can come to their own conclusions about these three citizenships—spiritual, global, and national—as a way of talking about these things.

My last comment is about what has been called for—and one of these sub-comments implies it: we really do need to think about why democracy is not providing. Some say "democracy is under attack and we have to do something," but you can't just mouth clichés. You have to provide a

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realistic and optimistic assessment, and you also have to think about what has not been provided. Why are people interested in soft authoritarianism? There are reasons for this in all these countries—that's why it's a global trend. How do you think about that? One answer was provided in the briefing: we need theology—good theology—and we need good public theology. If you don't have good public theology, you won't have the presence that has been called for. And if anything, Christians are called to be present. "Preach the gospel; use words if necessary."

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