

Introduction

“Let my People Go’:

Abraham Kuyper’s Christian-Historical Political Imagination”

*To me there is no past or future in art.
If a work of art cannot live always in
the present it must not be considered at all.*

---Pablo Picasso

*Time present and time past
And both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.*

*If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.*

---T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton”

*What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.*

*A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments.*

---T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”

In the history of the human quest for liberty, two symbolic events spaced two hundred years apart frame the modern political era. On November 10, 1793, as the Jacobin Reign of Terror was winding down, the Paris Commune of the revolutionary National Convention planned a Festival of Liberty “to celebrate the victory of philosophy over fanaticism.”¹ After seizing Notre Dame Cathedral---rebaptized the “Temple of Reason”---the revolutionaries “dechristianized” the former sanctuary by engaging in a public liturgy that celebrated, in the words of deputy Thuriot de La Rozière, the new “moral order of the Republic, of the Revolution, . . . that will

¹George Lefebvre, *The French Revolution: From 1793 to 1799*, trans. John Hall Stewart and James Friguglietti (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul and New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 78.

make us a people of brothers, a people of *philosophes*.”² The cult of “liberty and holy equality” was celebrated thus: “In the interior [of Notre Dame] a gimcrack Greco-Roman structure had been erected beneath the Gothic vaulting. A mountain made of painted linen and papier-mâché was built at the end of the nave where Liberty (played by a singer from the Opéra), dressed in white, wearing the Phrygian bonnet and holding a pike, bowed to the flame of Reason and seated herself on a bank of flowers and plants.”³

Similar cultic festivals of dechristianization and public affirmation of the new revolutionary civic order took place throughout France. Fueled by the fiery rhetoric of newspaper editor Jacques René Hébert and led by revolutionary enthusiasts such as the former priest Joseph Fouché, a violent iconoclasm erupted, stripping churches, cemeteries and other public space of all Christian symbols. Liberty trees replaced crucifixes, celebrants engaged in blasphemous parodies of Holy Communion, and sang antihymns “to words by Fouché celebrating ‘Reason as the Supreme Being.’”⁴ With such *fête de Raison*---crowned by the exaltation of the Goddess Reason/Liberty--- becoming the order of the day,⁵ the French Revolution at the same fulfilled Voltaire’s wish to *écrasez l’infame* and Rousseau’s insistence on a new secular, civil religion.⁶

If 1789 represents the beginning of the modern political era, then, so it has been argued, 1989 may represent its end since “within the bounds of these two centuries, an *ideological worldview* has arisen and fallen, come and gone.”⁷ In addition to the

²Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 776.

³Ibid., 778. Another historian describes the event thus: “Relays of patriotic maidens in virginal white paraded reverently before a temple of philosophy erected where the high altar had stood. From it emerged, at the climax of the ceremony, a red-capped figure representing Liberty. Appreciatively described by an official recorder of the scene as ‘a masterpiece of nature’, in daily life she was an actress; but in her symbolic role she led the officials of the commune to the Convention, where she received the fraternal embrace of the president and secretaries.” (William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989], 261.)

⁴Schama, *Citizens*, 779; for a detailed description of the Reign of Terror, see pp. 126-92.

⁵For another detailed account of such a festival, see Philip Dawson, ed., *The French Revolution* (Edgewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 119-127.

⁶Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (Middlesex, GB and New York: Penguin, 1968), 176-87 (Book IV, ch. 8, “The Civil Religion”).

⁷Thomas C. Oden, *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America and Russia* (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 32. Oden states his thesis clearly:

The duration of the *epoch* of modernity is now clearly identifiable as a precise two-hundred year period between 1789 and 1989, between the French Revolution and the collapse of communism. Such dating of historical periods is always disputable, but this one cries out with clarity, since it was announced with such a dramatic beginning point (the storming of the Bastille), and closed with such a precise moment of collapse (the literal fall of a vast symbolic wall in Berlin). The analogies between the revolutions of 1789 and 1989 will intrigue historians for centuries to come.

important symbolic significance of breaching the Berlin Wall, the massive protest of Chinese students in Beijing's Tiananmen Square also qualifies as a premier symbol of the 1989 Revolution. Of Tiananmen's important visual symbols, the most pregnant was under-reported by the American media. The remarkable photo of the lone protester facing a phalanx of government tanks---advancing on the tragically ironically named "Avenue of Peace"---on June 5, 1989, is more or less indelibly imprinted on our minds. Yet, more importantly, six days earlier, "just as it looked as if the demonstrations would fade away, to be resumed perhaps only after the summer holidays, the white plaster statue of the Goddess of Democracy was wheeled into the square in three sections and erected, facing the huge portrait of Mao that was hanging over the south gate of the Forbidden City. . . . The statue, 'like the students themselves, seemed immovable, indestructible, and permanent.'"⁸ It was at this point, when "it must have looked to [Chinese leader] Deng as if the demonstrations would never stop, . . . [that] it was decided to order the army to clear out the square."⁹

The Chinese students' peaceful protest---symbolized by the 33-foot, white Goddess of Democracy statue---was suppressed by brutal state violence against the protesters and the destruction of their symbol. What did the statue represent that precipitated such a major response? The official loudspeaker broadcasts directed at the students in the square called it "a foreign thing," and, "calling attention to the Goddess's resemblance to the Statue of Liberty," proclaimed: "This is China, not America."¹⁰ The significance of the American connection was underscored five years later at the unveiling, in a small park at the edge of San Francisco's Chinatown, of a bronze statue modeled after the original Goddess of Democracy. On that occasion Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi said:

The world witnessed the brutal suppression of individual freedom and liberty in Tiananmen Square. The brave men and women who demonstrated did so in the spirit of our forefathers. They quoted Thomas Jefferson, and built a Goddess of Democracy fashioned after our own Statue of Liberty.¹¹

The temptation to draw universal, meta-narrative historical conclusions at this point is almost irresistible. Two revolutions, two hundred years apart, symbolizing a defined era. 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. This conclusion in fact has been drawn in the realm of speculative philosophy of

⁸Jonathan Mirsky, "The Empire Strikes Back," *The New York Review of Books*, 37 (February 1, 1990): 22-3.

⁹Ibid., 22.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹*The New York Times NATIONAL*, Sunday, June 5, 1994, p. L, 38.

history,¹² as well as in more sober, empirical, historical accounting of the twentieth-century's trajectory.¹³ In an example of the latter, political historian David Fromkin summarizes the conclusion of his work as follows, along with appropriate cautionary notes about premature closure on history's end:

It was a fast and unexpected finish. Coming only a half-century after the United States seemingly solved the problems of German and Japanese expansionism, and less than forty years after America helped to push the countries of Western Europe into releasing their overseas colonies, the sudden and dramatic collapse of the last remaining empire---that of the Soviet Union---was so tidy and satisfying as an ending that it is tempting to think it *was* one; that history is a novel, and this is its last page. For someone trying to make sense of what happened, the challenge is to tell what the plots and subplots were, in other words, that led to the end of empires and the emergence, for the time being, of the United States as the sole global power.¹⁴

If Abraham Kuyper, a little more than seventy-five years after his death in 1920, were able to read the portrait sketched above of the century's end, he would be pleased. Aside from the tiny reference to Thomas Jefferson in one of the quotations, he would judge the events of recent world history to be a vindication of his own religious sense of world history's providential unfolding. To begin with, Kuyper passionately opposed the spirit of the French Revolution while, of course, fully recognizing its historical importance: "The history of our times," he contends, "starts from the *unbelief* of the French Revolution."¹⁵

In 1789 the turning point was reached.

Voltaire's mad cry, 'Down with the Scoundrel,' was aimed at Christ himself, but this cry was merely the expression of the most hidden thought from which the French Revolution sprang. The fanatic cry of another philosopher, "We no more need a God," and the odious shibboleth, "No God, no Master," of the Convention;---these were the sacreligious watchwords which at that time heralded the liberation of man as an emancipation from all Divine Authority. And if, in His impenetrable wisdom, God employed the Revolution as a means by which to overthrow the tyranny of the Bourbons, and to bring judgement on the princes who abused *His* nations as *their* footstool, nevertheless the principle of that Revolution remains thoroughly *anti-*

¹²Most famously by Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

¹³Eg., David Fromkin, *The The Time of the Americans: FDR, Eisenhower, Marshall, MacArthur---The Generation that Changed America's Role in the World* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1995).

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 537.

¹⁵Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures in Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 25; block quotation that follows is from p. 10.

Christian, and has since spread like a cancer, dissolving and undermining all that stood firm and consistent before our Christian faith.

In sharp contrast, the American Revolution, Kuyper told his American audience at Princeton University in 1898, was signally different; its liberty was not grounded in atheistic rebellion against God but in an appropriate, Calvinist-inspired rejection of tyranny. Liberty was a political good, hardwon by Dutch Calvinists in their struggle against Spain as well as by Americans from Great Britain. This liberty and the political experiment that ordered it was a beacon for the future of world history. "America," Kuyper contended that same year, in a Grand Rapids, Michigan address to Dutch-American fellow Calvinists, "is destined in the providence of God to become the most glorious and noble nation the world has ever seen. Some day its renown will eclipse the renown and splendor of Rome, Greece, and the old races."¹⁶ Providentially-led world history had, in Kuyper's view, a clear and certain telos and its world stream, for the most part fed by the religious springs of Calvinism, was to follow a clearly marked channel:

There is but one world-stream, broad and fresh, which from the beginning bore the promise of the future. This stream had its rise in Middle Asia and the Levant, and has steadily continued its course from East to West. From Western Europe it has passed on to your Eastern States, and from thence to California. The sources of this stream of development are found in Babylon and in the valley of the Nile. From thence it flowed on to Greece. From Greece it passed on to the Roman Empire. From the Romantic nations it continued its way to the Northwestern parts of Europe, and from Holland and England it reaches at length your continent.¹⁷

What Kuyper adds at this point is particularly striking from our vantage point at the close of the twentieth century and its developments (recall he is writing this in 1898!):

At present that stream [of world history] is at a standstill. *Its Western course through China and Japan is impeded; meanwhile no one can tell what forces for the future may yet lie slumbering in the Slavic races which have thus far failed of progress.* But while this secret of the future is still veiled in mystery, the course of this world stream from East to West can be denied by none.¹⁸

The American experiment, in other words, is holy, the providentially destined "end of history."

¹⁶*Grand Rapids Herald*, October 29, 1898; see Appendix B, "Abraham Kuyper's Grand Rapids' Address."

¹⁷Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 32.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 33; emphasis added.

Such unabashed faith in the holy inevitability of the American experiment in ordered liberty is hardly the common conviction of Americans themselves today. Rather, the very existence of American civil religion and belief in America's manifest destiny is seen as a significant moral and political problem. Thanks in good measure to 1960s countercultural attacks on "Amerika," a profoundly antiAmerican spirit is often expressed in the American academy and the media. Multicultural enthusiasm for "diversity," often arising out of concern that traditional American "founding myths" are exclusionary and oppressive of minorities,¹⁹ has led to the "reinventing of America."²⁰ For some evangelical Christians this cultural spirit repudiating the "myth" of America's founding as a "Christian nation" and the consequent conviction about providential purpose is reenforced by concerns about the "idolotry" of civil religion.²¹ At the same time, it is particularly evangelical Christians---the so-called "New Christian Right"---who are increasingly becoming the defenders of the idea and ideal of America.²² It is not necessary at this point to elaborate on the question concerning the health of America's soul except to say that Americans are seriously divided about the present condition and future hope of the American experiment. Stated differently, America is involved in a *Kulturkampf*, a culture war about its very identity as a nation.²³ Public debates about multiculturalism, public education--particularly the teaching of history and literature---and the role of religion in public life more broadly, not to mention the battles about race, immigration, affirmative action, welfare, abortion, euthanasia, gay rights and so forth, all point to a crisis of national moral identity. The question we raise here is this: Supposing the claims about a crisis in the American soul to be correct, how does a nation go about repairing its soul? How does one go about healing a national community's wounds. What political actions are required to bring this about? And, recognizing that they faced similar cultural and social ennui, what

¹⁹See, eg., Leslie Bekowitz et. al., eds., *America in Theory* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

²⁰See, eg., Robert Royal, ed., *Reinventing the American People: Unity and Diversity Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1995).

²¹Eg., Robert D. Linder and Richard V. Pierard, *Twilight of the Saints: Biblical Christianity and Civil Religion* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1978).

²²Eg., Pat Robertson, *America's Dates With Destiny* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986); Rus Walton, *One Nation Under God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987).

²³The literature is vast. Among the important titles are James Davison Hunter *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); William Bennett, *The Devaluing of America: The Fight for Our Culture and Our Children* (New York: Summit Books, 1991); Richard John Neuhaus, *America Against Itself: Moral Vision and the Public Order* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992); Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1992); Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996); Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); Pat Robertson, *The Turning Tide: The Fall of Liberalism and the Rise of Common Sense* (Dallas: Word, 1993).

did earlier Christian social transformers such as Abraham Kuyper do to achieve political and moral change? Or is politics not the answer? Put differently, how can an unbelieving (secular) civilization be saved? We find a surprising answer from yet another foreign source, the Russian emigré writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

*"Beauty will save the World"*²⁴

To transform the world, so modern man believes, one needs the right politics. Politics, in this viewpoint, refers primarily to political platforms, programs, and campaign strategies—in short, political technique.²⁵ But what about the "vision" that governs the technique? What about the political imagination that provides passion for ideals such as liberty and energy for the hard political work required for success? How is political vision communicated and passed on from generation to generation? Does literature play a role here? Can art in general make a *political* contribution to a nation, to its civic identity? Why do iconographic works of art such as the French revolutionaries' Goddess of Reason or the Chinese students' Goddess of Democracy generate such passion in their devotees as well their detractors?

In his *Nobel Lecture* Alexander Solzhenitsyn addresses the political significance of art by calling attention to its dual religious possibilities. He picks up a point made by already by Aristotle about the formal neutrality of art [rhetoric], by noting that while "art will remain" even though "we will die," there are two kinds of artists in the world. "One kind of artist imagines himself the creator of an independent spiritual world and shoulders the act of creating that world and the people in it, assuming total responsibility for it—but he collapses, for no mortal genius is able to hold up under such a load. Just as man, who once declared himself the center of existence, has not been able to create a stable spiritual system."²⁶ In contrast to this Protagorean, if not Promethean, vision of art, Solzhenitsyn sketches a portrait of the artist as servant-apprentice: "Another artist acknowledges a higher power above him and joyfully works as a common apprentice under God's heaven, although his responsibility for all that he writes down or depicts, and for those who understand him, is all the greater. On the other hand, he did not create the world, it is not given direction by him, it is a world about whose foundations he has no doubt."²⁷ Thus, two kinds of people, two kinds of art. Solzhenitsyn probes the spiritual depth of this

²⁴For this phrase from Dostoyevsky via Solzhenitsyn as well as the inspiration for the following discussion of Solzhenitsyn's moral, artistic vision, I am indebted to Edward E. Ericson, Jr., *Solzhenitsyn: The Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), and *Solzhenitsyn and the Modern World* (Washington, D. C.: Regnery Gateway, 1993); cf. Gregory Wolfe, "Beauty Will Save the World," *The Intercollegiate Review*, 27/1 (Fall, 1991): 27-31.

²⁵For a summary and critique of this view see Jacques Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, trans. Konrad Kellen (New York: Knopf, 1967).

²⁶Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Nobel Lecture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 4.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 4-5.