Article Summary: Although much has been done to articulate and develop Christian perspectives on domestic politics, very little exists of this kind of perspective on global affairs and international relations. In this article, Robert Joustra outlines three sign posts that are key to such a perspective, emerging from the Kuyperian tradition, and Kuyper himself, as well as the Center for Public Justice’s own work.

CPJ urges Christians of every state and nation to “recognize that they share a common commitment to justice beyond their own nation.” Discussing state sovereignty, international law, and freedom of religion, Joustra explores how the fruit of this justice can be found and upheld in contemporary globalization.

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In 1999, Bob Goudzwaard, an economist and former Dutch Parliamentarian, could hardly guess how dramatically the world would change by the time his CPJ Kuyper lecture came to press (2001). Yet the principles of what Goudzwaard called Christians toward have aged remarkably well. His argument that “Christians have a responsibility to live in close touch with our societies, to understand the signs of the times, and to discern the spirit – or spirits – of the age” is hardly dated. His call, as James Skillen says in his Foreword, for “the fearful to wake up, to shake off their hypnosis” in order to become “mature realistic, and open-faced” human beings once again is as prophetic in 2017 as it was in 1999. Globalization, Skillen aptly summarized, “can take a better rather than worse direction if we learn obedience to the Creator-Redeemer of the ends of the earth.”

Much water has flowed under that bridge since 1999, and yet we have hardly picked up Goudzwaard’s call to “wake up” and discern the “spirits of our age” at work in globalization, among them globalizing information technology, rapid urbanization, the political-economy of capitalist globalization, global environmental pandemics, and even the somewhat unexpected global resurgence of religion.¹

¹ Much has now been made of the “post-secular” turn in global affairs, especially since 2001. For one of the foundational texts on this issue, see Scott Thomas, The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations (Palgrave, 2005).
Although a great deal of work has been done on Christian perspectives on domestic (especially American) politics, very little exists of this perspective in actual global affairs, even in the world of Reformed or neo-Calvinist scholarship, which partly because of its forebears like Abraham Kuyper, is especially well situated to do macro-level political and social analysis. Its architectonic critique—understanding and explaining systems and institutions by examining their incurably religious roots and functions—has hardly been turned on the institutions and systems of global governance. Instead, this critique has been leveled on an issue by issue basis without tackling the irreducible complexity of so-called “wicked problems” or, more generally, has not turned towards developing a Christian perspective on international relations.

What follows are three “sign posts” that are key to such a perspective, emerging from the Kuyperian tradition, and Kuyper himself, as well as the Center for Public Justice’s own work. (These signs are also the basis of my next book project, whose working title is the same as this article.)

The Sovereignty of Nations: Augustinian Realism for Terrifying Times

Abraham Kuyper’s life and work predated the renaissance in what became Christian Realism, both in the English School of the United Kingdom and in American international relations. There is, however, much to be said, as Eric Patterson does, about a “trans-Atlantic” conversation between the “Amsterdam School” (Abraham Kuyper), the “English School” (Martin Wight, Christopher Dawson), and the “American School” (Reinhold Niebuhr) on Christian Realism.

At least one common denominator is the work of Augustine, with his emphasis on the limited yet essential role of political authority, the dignity of human persons (the imago Dei), and yet the fallibility of political projects and the fallenness that so often permeates

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not only hearts and minds but also systems and institutions. On this side of the eschaton, we will struggle with the reality of anarchy—by which international relations scholars mean simply that there is no overarching political authority to appeal to among states—and therefore with both power and order.

The nation, its identity, limits, and relations is also one of the three pillars in Kuyper’s Our Program on which his “Overseas Manifesto” rests. He argued that the national character of a people was necessarily religious. Religion, then, is not a by-product of a national life, but it is the wellspring from which national life emerges. To even do foreign affairs is first to ask religious kinds of questions: what do my neighbors love? And how have they arranged their social and national life around the objects of their worship? This is not a purely cognitive or philosophical task of investigating histories, policies, and religious texts. It is a more anthropological task than that, for the organic nature of nations must be observed, and maybe lived, not simply intellectually dissected. True worship springs up, observed in practice, not merely preached from pulpits or delivered in national assemblies.

Yet we must also take from Kuyper his ready repentance, in his final days, of baptizing any one nation’s foreign policy. For Kuyper, to say that a nation’s identity is divinely ordained as coterminous with Christ’s Kingship is to risk the kind of egoistic, Christian imperialism that unseats the sovereignty of God and exchanges it for the idol of the nation. Kuyper saw firsthand the clash of idolatries in the Great War, and we would do well to remember that despite his enduring passion for Calvinistic Christianity as a sure foundation for national life, the simplistic identification of one nation’s life with the will of God was a great and terrible evil from which the world did not soon recover.

From Kuyper we can also take a kind of qualified endorsement of state sovereignty. What he saw were the challenges in twentieth-century society demanding a balancing of powers and institutions, and with the growth of technological and economic power in particular, he foresaw the need to grow the institutions of justice alongside them. Governance, in other words, must keep pace with the scale of problems to be governed, not to lapse into the tyrannical states Kuyper so feared, but recognizing that public justice in a century dominated by the pace of technology and commerce that was before unseen would need governance regimes capable of maintaining the boundaries of those spheres of life.

State sovereignty, then, for Kuyper was not about the absolutist authority on the part of the nation-state, but rather about investing in it sufficient authority so that it may successfully accomplish its God-ordained task of doing public justice. “Sovereign in its own sphere,” as Kuyper would say, means a different thing than Westphalian “state sovereignty.” The former speaks of differentiated, bounded powers, the latter of
uncontested, anthropocentric authority. For Kuyper, sovereignty could never be absolute, for where states fail in their stewardship, there may well be a role for higher authorities, international laws fore among them, to mitigate such failure.

**The Rule of Law: Public Justice and the International Institutionalism We Need Now**

Kuyper’s second pillar, international law, is one that most broadly liberal international theorists can support. International law, for Kuyper, was about recognizing the constraints under which power, even great global power, operates. The laws among nations, then, may be thought of as a kind of functional stewardship of deeper norms, most significantly the norms of Christ and his Kingdom.

For Kuyper, good law—justice—should find its root in Christian principles. But in the here and now he may well have had time, patience, and even some fascination with other religious traditions articulating their own, indigenous rationales for those same principles. While Christians may well strive for all nations to know the Gospel, the Christian foreign policy maker must know that it is both impractical and naïve to wait for the new heavens and the new earth to make policy and partnership with non-Christian neighbors and nations.

And, further, because of Kuyper’s strong emphasis on religion as a ground motive and life force of a civilization, the work of international law, particularly in a post-secular world order, becomes as much inter-religious dialogue as it does politics and law. There is, in that sense, no set of laws between plural nations that is purely secular. All laws, per Kuyper’s thought, have one foot in religion. The key, then, is finding common cause, rather than abdicating particularistic visions.

Finding common cause among rival root systems is reminiscent, of course, of what the Center for Public Justice means by principled pluralism. In international law and global governance, such “commonness” is usually given functional life by things like treaties, organizations, institutions, and the norms they uphold. These institutions answer not only a real need (like the International Civil Aviation Organization) but also become meeting places to evaluate, debate, and establish new norms for global life.

Enthusiasm is mixed among international relations scholars on the scope and effectiveness of these sorts of institutions, but they are the front line and the first word in any action or any conversation on issues of justice beyond the nation. Christians of every state and nation, says the Center for Public Justice, “should recognize that they share a common commitment to justice beyond their own nation” and therefore
“international and even transnational institutions of governance are needed to do justice to the international commons.”

The emphasis here is about the recognition that globalization has created enormous opportunity, as well as “wicked” problems of “irreducible complexity” that require coordinated governance regimes. Global institutions are one way we advance justice, and one way we practice love of neighbor.

**Discerning the Spirits: Freedom of Religion or Belief**

Finally, there is no question that perhaps Kuyper’s most driving concern in international relations was making safe the world for the proclamation of the Gospel, and so he would be a passionate advocate today of what is called freedom of religion or belief. There is some question about whether Kuyper would embrace that freedom for all religions, or if he would have a special or perhaps exclusive priority for the Christian religion.

But I believe it is clear from Kuyper’s own policies in Indonesia that while he placed special priority on freedom for Christian missions, he also recognized that fundamental biblical precept that there can be no coercion in religion, and therefore all religions must have the same freedom he so cherished for Christianity. If, indeed, the character of nations is shaped in part by their religious worldviews, freedom of religion or belief not only ensures the Great Commission, but it also ensures the organic character of nations; the freedom to contest and debate what a nation is, its identity, its future, and its loves. The incapacity to do political theology, for Kuyper, would be a denial of the organic character of a nation; it would be an authoritarian formalism, frozen and fragile, destined not to bend and grow, but simply to break.

And yet, freedom of religion or belief as a category is also wider than a mere human right. It is a call to “discern the spirits,” as Bob Goudzwaard would say, to think not only about “breaking the chains” of overreaching states, but also of breaking the hypnosis of our age, the often subtle idolatries to which Kuyper himself became so attentive only later in his life after witnessing the apocalypse that was the Great War.

In *Pro Rege* especially, one can read in Kuyper a great weight of sadness and a new emphasis on the anti-thesis, as he conceded that “the genuinely devout in every one of them [Christian nations] had not lagged a bit in baptizing their country’s cause as the Lord’s.” That was the colonial and imperial rivalry of Kuyper’s day, a sickness born not only of lust of power but also structural racism and political domination.

What, then, of our day? What, as Bob Goudzwaard put it already in the 1980s, of the *Idols of Our Time*? This seems to me the Kuyperian watchword for globalization:
discerning the spirits and weighing of the idols of our age. Not the willful ones, of course, but the ones that have names and penance, the ones that, like Kuyper, we see barely only in retrospect when they are already consuming the world.

We need only look to the three great modern languages in which power is now conducted—(big) data, law, and finance—to discern our day’s idolatries, and, if we are serious, to teach ourselves and our students to “know what time it is.” But savvy cultural and political analysis is too shallow for the truly Augustinian-inspired globalization scholar. The only real inoculant is to be driven back to Scripture.

Thus the beginning of any Christian approach to international relations should take this last lesson from Kuyper with special seriousness. It begins with Scripture, and the Church, and in prayer. It does not end there, of course, but it does return, again, and again. The altars of our nations need constant attention, no more so than when they are powerful, wealthy, and responsible.

**Conclusion**

“Fearful times may await us and our children,” wrote Kuyper in *Pro Rege*, “but in the midst of that fear faith rests in the silent confession of Christ’s kingship, also as it pertains to the lot of peoples and nations. What is behind us was the fruit and outcome of his regiment. What now threatens us does not come over us except through his holy ordination, and regardless of the storms that may rise up against us, we know that all power in heaven and on earth has been given to him; that nothing will therefore come over us apart from his will; and that those who seek the glory of Christ alone, and not their own, will one day rejoice in the outcome to which his kingly ordination leads us through each and every storm.”

These sign posts I have discussed are just that: efforts made to find the fruit of justice in contemporary globalization. Sovereignty yes, but also responsibility. Law and order, certainly, but also justice. And freedom of religion or belief, but not to be released from one master (the totalitarian state) only to be overtaken by three worse ones (anthropocentric scientism, legalism, and unlimited growth). As part of this tradition, a kind of Augustinian Realism, the Center for Public Justice stands as grateful recipient of greats like Augustine, Calvin, Kuyper, Goudzwaard, Skillen, and more, to offer sign posts for safe travel, and warnings for perils, so that we too can live with “hope in troubled times.”