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Religion, Progress, and Intellectual Freedom:
John Stuart Mill, Abraham Kuyper,
and the Shape of a Plural Society

Abstract:

John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* is typically regarded as the key defense of free discussion in nineteenth-century Europe, and thus it remains relevant to contemporary concerns about free speech. It is also often seen as the fruit of its author's secular mindset, suggesting a substantive link between that mindset and free discussion. This article examines that connection in light of the vigorous defense of free speech offered by the Calvinist theologian and later Dutch prime minister Abraham Kuyper. Rather than emphasizing the secular nature of Mill's thought, our discussion highlights the progressive nature of his religious views and their connection to his stance on free discussion. Kuyper's writings, on the other hand, show not only that among Mill's contemporaries this freedom was often grounded in traditional Christian arguments, but also a Tocquevillian concern about the potential superficiality of such freedom in the absence of a robust associational life. While Mill will thus help us look at Kuyper's thought in a broader European context, Kuyper reminds us of the limits of the still dominant Millian outlook.

Keywords:

Abraham Kuyper, John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville, intellectual freedom, pluralism

Introduction

Concerns about freedom of speech – with a large subset of debates about “cancel culture” and “political correctness” – have been extraordinarily significant over the past decade.¹ The ongoing debate touches on this freedom in society at large, and often in the specific context of universities. As we delve deeper into this discussion, the question of intellectual sources for defending this freedom becomes increasingly important. The existence of shared intellectual sources for such a defense seems to be a breath of fresh air for a debate that is often framed in terms of the ongoing culture wars. It is thus not surprising that in many circles concerned with freedom of speech, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) has become the philosopher of choice, whatever the other beliefs of those involved. He became, for example, the unofficial philosopher of The Heterodox Academy, a platform for viewpoint diversity on American campuses.² This predilection is easy to understand. Chapter 2 of *On Liberty* offers the classic account of unfettered free speech. The three arguments in favor of free speech, which Mill explores at length, are the following: the suppressed opinion may possibly be true; a true opinion will only be held as a “living truth” (rather than a “dead dogma”) if it is contested; and conflicting claims may “share the truth between them,” rather than one being entirely false and the other entirely true.³ These positions were developed by Mill against the orthodoxy that prevailed in his society, but they can, it would seem, be usefully applied against the very different orthodoxies of our own time. Not only liberals, but also political conservatives and orthodox religious believers who value freedom of speech can therefore turn to the second chapter of Mill’s *On Liberty*, which, when read independently, seems to offer neutral ground on which different groups and traditions can defend a freedom they all cherish.

1) The specific categories of “cancel culture,” “political correctness,” and the like are of course debated. The actual existence of a crisis, however, is widely attested. See Manning and Campbell, *The Rise of Victimhood Culture*; and Schlott and Lukianoff, *The Canceling of the American Mind*.

2) This claim can be supported not only by numerous references to Mill across the associations’ various platforms and documents, but also by the fact that Jonathan Haidt and Mill biographer Richard V. Reeves created a comic-book adaptation of the second chapter of *On Liberty* specifically for first-year college students. See Haidt and Reeves, *All Minus One*.

3) Mill, *On Liberty*, 229, 243, and 252.

If we look beyond this second chapter, however, it is clear that further questions arise. As Robert P. George has written, Mill's vision is "imbued with 19th century optimism and belief in progress."⁴ Instead of appealing to "abstract right," Mill grounds respect for individuals in utility, "but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being."⁵ Given his objections to the utilitarianism and vision of progress that underlie Mill's project, George suggests grounding freedom of speech and religion in the view of conscience defended by Mill's contemporary John Henry Newman (1801–1890). Here George finds a vision of freedom more profound than Mill's, grounded in our duty to ask the great existential questions of human nature. This is a view for which conscience – quoting Newman's *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* (1875) – "has rights because it has duties."⁶ George also contends, moreover, that in contrast to Newman, Mill "had something of a tin ear for religion."⁷ According to George's proposed interpretation, Mill must have expected religious activities and practices to "soon wither away in an age of freedom (since man is a 'progressive being' and freedom brings 'enlightenment')."⁸ Following other voices in the scholarship on Mill, I argue rather for the significance of Mill's religious views: he did indeed see man as a "progressive being," but this led him to a progressive form of religiosity rather than expecting it to wither away. And, as I will argue, this view of religion is significant for the way in which he approached intellectual freedom.

This makes the contrast with Christian thinkers such as Newman all the more relevant, so I concur with George in this search for voices beyond Mill to ground these fundamental freedoms. In this article, however, I compare Mill not with Newman, but with the Dutch theologian and prime minister Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920). Kuyper does not seem to have been acquainted with Mill's writings, though he may have had indirect knowledge of them through Mill's critic, James Fitzjames Stephen. In any case, my focus here is not on an explicit engagement of one with the writings of the other. I seek to draw out a contrast between two figures

4) George, "John Stuart Mill and John Henry Newman," 41.

5) Mill, *On Liberty*, 224.

6) George, "John Stuart Mill and John Henry Newman," 43–44.

7) Ibid., 42.

8) Ibid.

that share relevant concerns. Both Mill and Kuyper stand out as figures whose intellectual achievements went hand in hand with practical political engagement and significant participation in the public debate of their countries.⁹ Kuyper strove for a pluralist State in which confessional Christians not only preserved a place for the private cultivation of their faith, but also a network of institutions in which their understanding of human life could mature and which would give them a publicly recognizable voice. Much ink has been spilt over this project and the neo-Calvinist movement that emerged from it, but often without attending to the broad intellectual context in which it emerged.¹⁰ The contrast between Kuyper and Mill, as we shall see, helps us to situate the Dutch theologian and statesman within a wider European discussion of freedom of speech. The contrast between the two authors furthermore reminds us that early on the debate around free speech included different accounts of the value of diversity, of the possibility of a neutral ground, and of the type of institutional culture required for intellectual freedom. Several of Kuyper's intuitions can thus be brought to bear on current discussions that are often restricted to a Millian horizon.

In the first section I will consider Mill's position in more detail. The main question here is whether his arguments for free discussion in chapter two are really so independent of the rest of the argument presented in 1859 in *On Liberty*. We will consider his analysis of the "spirit of the age," his critique of received custom, his religious views, his (more or less explicit) philosophy of history, and see how his positions in these areas relate to (and limit) his defense of free discussion. The second section will present Abraham Kuyper's recently translated texts on tolerable speech, the arguments he develops in its defense, and the way in which he describes a non-liberal tradition of reflection on liberty. This will set the stage for the final section, in which I will confront the views of Mill and Kuyper and draw conclusions for the contemporary debate. My aim, I should stress, is not only to draw attention to their differences, but also to highlight a common concern. But the differences in their approach to that concern have consequences that remain relevant to the contemporary discussion of intellectual freedom.

9) For biographic accounts, see Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*; and Reeves, *John Stuart Mill*.

10) For a survey of the whole movement, see Brock and Sutanto, *T&T Clark Handbook of Neo-Calvinism*.

I. Mill on Free Speech, Religion, and Progress

I have already mentioned Mill's arguments for free discussion: the suppressed position may be the true one, truth is made clearer and more vivid by contrast with falsehood, and sometimes two opposing positions share a truth that they can only fully describe together after confrontation. These arguments from the second chapter of *On Liberty* can, as we have said, be read as an independent treatise on this particular subject. In fact, they are often read in this way and such an independent reading can have a defensible role to play.¹¹ But when comparing different philosophical approaches, the place of this chapter in Mill's work is obviously relevant. The introductory first chapter squarely places these arguments in a particular tradition of political philosophy. There, Mill famously sets out his harm principle, which prohibits state intervention except to protect third parties. The individual's own physical or moral good is not an argument for such intervention.¹² This is a well-known aspect of his overall argument, and it is often present in accounts of his work. It also fits well with a straightforward reading of Chapter 2, as both chapters reject inadequate reasons for restricting speech. Subsequent chapters, however, have tended to receive less attention. Chapter three presents a quite specific human ideal as goal: a strong and assertive personality, with "peculiarity of taste, eccentricity of conduct."¹³ Here, Mill draws quite explicitly on Wilhelm von Humboldt, though Mill's conclusions are more optimistic than Humboldt's about what the state can do to promote this development.¹⁴ But whatever one thinks of this promotion, the other side of this defense of original personality is the critique of "received opinion," "hereditary creed," and "despotism of custom," that runs through *On Liberty*.¹⁵ This is crucial to the point I am discussing in this article: Mill was obviously interested in the rational exchange of ideas and the reasons for preserving such exchange – the subjects of his second chapter – but he was also interested in the triumph of a particular kind of individual. While this may sound unsurprising – every philosopher arguably

11) This is particularly evident in pieces aimed at a wider audience concerned with freedom of speech. See, for example, Eduardo, "John Stuart Mill's Enduring Arguments."

12) Mill, *On Liberty*, 223.

13) *Ibid.*, 265.

14) On this, see Walls, "Self-Development and the Liberal State."

15) Mill, *On Liberty*, 247, 248, and 272.

wants to see the triumph of some ideal – we must ask how these two aims relate to each other. How central would this concern for free speech remain once this cultural ideal triumphed? Freedom of discussion is useful “*while* mankind are imperfect,” Mill writes.¹⁶ It is easy to imagine pluralism as just one ingredient of progress, but lines like these remind us of the tension that can exist between the idea of progress and that of pluralism. This tension is clearly present in Mill’s critique of received opinion. There is a sense in which open discussion can be fostered by the critique of established views. However, framing rival opinions as mere hereditary or customary beliefs can also lead to simple disdain – resulting in a society of free debate, yet one in which the playing field is slanted against the ordinary citizen.

Questions like these invite a deeper acquaintance with Mill’s views on progress. A natural starting point for this examination is the series of articles he published in 1831 under the title *The Spirit of the Age*. These articles can be seen as Mill’s first intervention as a cultural reformer, and the situation he describes is one in which the previously prevailing intellectual authority has fallen out of favor with the people, but in which no new intellectual authority has taken its place. The present society is therefore a transitional society. There are two things to note about this perspective. First, Mill’s understanding of how this came about; second, his rejection of this lack of shared authority as a sustainable or desirable condition. As for how it came about, the key word is indeed “discussion.” Compared with the past, Mill stresses that now “Men may not reason, better, concerning the great questions in which human nature is interested, but they reason more. Large subjects are discussed more, and longer, and by more minds. Discussion has penetrated deeper into society.”¹⁷ But this deeper penetration of discussion is not necessarily constructive. As he argues, discussion may be conducive to the discovery and dissemination of truth, but “this is not so certain a consequence as the weakening of error.”¹⁸ For Mill, discussion has thus led Europe into a transitional age, and its transitional nature is worth emphasizing: Mill describes this state as one of anarchy, an unsettled condition with both praiseworthy and worrying aspects. A crucial problem, in his view, is the fact that the intellectual

16) Ibid., 260. My emphasis.

17) Mill, “The Spirit of the Age, I,” 233.

18) Ibid.

class is divided and can therefore exercise little authority.¹⁹ In other words, in these early articles Mill does not envisage a pluralistic future. Rather, he critically describes the present pluralism as a temporary condition. For now, “those who have made the investigation of social truths their occupation, have not yet sanctioned any new body of doctrine with their unanimous, or nearly unanimous, consent.”²⁰ *The Spirit of the Age* can thus be broadly described as a guide to elite replacement. Open discussion certainly plays a role in this replacement, but mainly a negative one.

Arguments like those developed in *The Spirit of the Age* are rarely seen as central to the argument of *On Liberty*, and there is good reason to be cautious. These are Saint-Simonian and Comtean ingredients of his early thought, from which Mill later distanced himself. This distancing, however, was not complete. A decade after *The Spirit of the Age*, Mill was still writing to Comte about the “transitional age” and agreeing with him about the “spiritual force” essential to contemporary social regeneration.²¹ He would later publicly distance himself from Comte’s version of the Religion of Humanity. But he did not reject the idea of such a religion altogether. And while this side of Mill’s thought has been carefully examined by some scholars, its full ramifications have not been brought to bear on today’s discussion of free speech and Mill’s role within it. Let us therefore look at it more closely.

As Timothy Larsen’s recent study of his religious thought describes it, Mill’s religion was that of a “hopeful, imaginative, beneficial, probabilist theism.”²² It was seldom the subject of Mill’s public discussion, but it is quite fully developed in the posthumously published *Utility of Religion*. Written five years before *On Liberty*, this essay was published in 1874 as part of the *Three Essays on Religion*. One of its features is the idea that religion is gradually being purged of its immoral or harmful consequences; this is accomplished by human cooperation in this gradual perfection of religion. As he writes,

A virtuous human being assumes in this theory the exalted character of a fellow-laborer with the Highest, a fellow combatant in the great strife;

19) Ibid.

20) Mill, “The Spirit of the Age, II,” 245.

21) Mill to Comte, October 23, 1842, in Haac, *The Correspondence*, 108–11.

22) Larsen, *John Stuart Mill*, 209.

contributing his little, which by the aggregation of many like himself becomes much, towards that progressive ascendancy, and ultimately complete triumph of good over evil, which history points to, and which this doctrine teaches us to regard as planned by the Being to whom we owe all the benevolent contrivance we behold in Nature.²³

Mill's religion is thus bound up with his philosophy of history. There is a "progressive ascendancy" that has been planned by God, but since human collaboration is expected, this is not a vision of historical necessity. There are no strict or inexorable laws of history. But for all the "softness" of Mill's progressivism, it consists not in mere hope for improvement. Mill thought that certain forms of moral progress could be conceived as final achievements. His religion is not only one of cooperation with the divine being toward the "complete triumph of good over evil," but also one of secured progress. There are types of moral knowledge whose preservation does not depend on the continued existence of theistic religious belief. Granting that some precepts of Christ "carry some kinds of moral goodness to a greater height than had ever been attained before," Mill considers that "this benefit, whatever it amounts to, has been gained. Mankind has entered into the possession of it. It has become the property of humanity, and cannot now be lost by anything short of a return to primeval barbarism."²⁴ This is quite a specific thesis, and to grasp it fully we might do well to compare it with the famous Böckenförde dictum: that the liberal secular state draws its life from preconditions which it cannot itself guarantee.²⁵ Böckenförde was saying this in defense of that liberal state and its policies in the realm of speech, but pointing to the need for an underlying ethos that the state itself cannot sustain. Liberal politics, in this reading, needs religion not only at its starting point. In contrast, Mill's form of progressivism recognizes the specific contribution of Christianity to the refinement of our moral conscience, but he sees this contribution as sufficiently secured and not as continuously dependent on its original source. There are no rigid laws of history, but his progressivism is not entirely "soft."

23) Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, 425.

24) *Ibid.*, 416.

25) For a reading of the dictum as defense of the liberal political order, see Stein, "The Böckenförde Dictum."

This philosophy of history is also present in *On Liberty*, and it has a direct impact on Mill's view of free speech. "As mankind improve[s]," he writes in its second chapter, "the number of doctrines which are no longer disputed or doubted will be constantly on the increase."²⁶ In some sense, he believed that there are worldviews that will be discarded by the course of history. It is quite clear that this did not cancel out his genuine concern for freedom of thought and discussion. But as he further notes in chapter three, "the spirit of improvement is not always a spirit of liberty."²⁷ This line is particularly important because it reveals Mill's insight into the potential conflict between liberty and progress. But even though he identifies that tension, he does not further explore it and instead stresses that either in the form of improvement or of liberty the "progressive principle" is opposed to "the sway of Custom."²⁸

The big question, then, is how much weight we should give to this progressivism when considering his arguments for liberty. Most of Mill's readers continue to interpret this work as if he were advancing little more than a strict conception of the harm principle and a future of intense discussion, so long as that harm is avoided. Read in such terms, he appears to be the ideal philosopher in whose work our concern for freedom of expression should be grounded. But as Joseph Hamburger has noted, it is crucial to recover an image of Mill as the radical cultural reformer that he was. While James Mill and Jeremy Bentham were content to criticize traditional religion, John Stuart Mill believed that his cultural politics had to include a positive program of moral regeneration to fill the vacuum thus generated.²⁹ And this program reached its point of culmination in the idea of a Religion of Humanity.³⁰ Mill did not wish for the liberticide future state envisioned by Comte under that title, but he did conceive his epoch as transitional and thus moving toward the cultural hegemony of this higher form of religiosity. In light of this, we should not imagine his aim as the establishment of a simple "open society," but one that has discarded much of "received opinion" and is quite assertive in preventing its return.

26) Mill, *On Liberty*, 250.

27) *Ibid.*, 272.

28) *Ibid.*

29) For the contrast with his father and Bentham, see Hamburger, *John Stuart Mill on Liberty and Control*, 47.

30) Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, 422.

The critique of Christianity found in *On Liberty* is therefore not incidental to Mill's argument. It is in part an implicit critique, present, for example, in his denunciation of the despotism of custom (it was broadly Christian custom that he was targeting). But it is also an explicit critique, as we see in his appeal to a "Pagan self-assertion" that should counterweigh "Christian self-denial."³¹ Mill presents this as a critique of "Calvinism," which he sees as crushing all human faculties and subsuming all good in submission to God's will. One might well ask whether there are any distinctive features of Calvinism in his critique, which Mill himself affirms is "held in mitigated form by many who do not consider themselves Calvinists."³² Writing in 1873, one of his foremost critics, James Fitzjames Stephen, noted that Mill "uses the word Calvinistic almost at random."³³ As Fitzjames – not himself a believer – captured, it was, in fact, a much broader Christian tradition that he was targeting under that title. Fitzjames' critique of Mill may well serve as a bridge to our next section. Their clash, Greg Conti has written, "was not, as it has often been imagined to be, a clash between secular and religious visions of politics, or between liberal and illiberal policies on the press."³⁴ If anything, the clash arises from Fitzjames' critique of the neutered public space, the equality of opinions, and what he saw as Mill's fetishization of diversity.³⁵ Free speech had its advocates and critics in the late nineteenth century, but for our contemporary challenges we may have more to learn from the division among its advocates. Partially drawing from Fitzjames, as we will see, Abraham Kuyper shed further light on these questions.

II. Kuyper and Earnestness in the Face of Error

In May and June 1874, the Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper published a series of sixteen articles in *De Standaard* (a daily newspaper he founded in 1872). This series constitutes his main defense of free discussion (only recently translated and

31) Mill, *On Liberty*, 266.

32) *Ibid.*, 265.

33) Stephen, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, 82.

34) Conti, "James Fitzjames Stephen, John Stuart Mill," 379.

35) *Ibid.*, 386–97.

made available as a continuous work). Though it is his only extensive discussion of the topic, it is well integrated with the rest of his social philosophy, which has been characterized as “non-secular yet pluralistic at the same time,” challenging “the influential idea of his opponents that progress, toleration, and secularization were inseparable.”³⁶ A prolific journalist and theologian, Kuyper founded the Anti-Revolutionary Party in 1878 and, through an alliance with Roman Catholics, gradually ended an era of liberal dominance in Dutch politics. The end of that dominance did not mean the end of pluralism. It meant, rather, that this pluralism should be grounded in a Christian social philosophy. Kuyper’s social vision was structured around the independence of the various social spheres. In a parallel development to Roman Catholic discussions of subsidiarity, he described this in terms of “sphere sovereignty.”³⁷ In such social plurality he found a healthy way to channel religious and philosophical plurality.

But the series of articles we are concerned with here is not characterized by an enthusiastic embrace of diversity. It is worth noting from the outset how this starting point differs from Mill’s. It could well be argued that a Socratic spirit pervades the work of both thinkers, that they trust dialogue and refutation as ways to truth, and that they regard being wrong as one of the worst things that can happen to us. But it is also true that in Mill’s work this is combined with an emphasis on originality and spontaneity, an active encouragement of “experiments in living.”³⁸ This can, of course, be a virtuous combination, encouraging an undaunted search for truth; but the experimental relation to oneself can also encourage a trivialization of the dangers of error. A decade before, in *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard had described a self that “is constantly relating to itself only experimentally,” and he considered a lack of seriousness its salient characteristic.³⁹ One will hardly impute such lack of seriousness to Mill, but the experimental relation to oneself can be taken further than Mill takes it, with quite un-Socratic consequences. If there is a Kuyperian Socratism, it is one that is more concerned with this danger. His pluralism never trivializes the danger of error; he does not flirt with the idea of diversity as an intrinsic good. Notably, the

36) Harinck, “Abraham Kuyper’s Vision,” 115.

37) For a thoughtful portrayal of the convergences, see Chaplin, “Subsidiarity and Sphere Sovereignty.”

38) Mill, *On Liberty*, 261.

39) Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 100.

title of the entire series is “Is Error a Punishable Offence?” If error is serious and we are often trapped in self-deception, then our search for truth requires strategies of self-distancing (like the standard Socratic strategy of exposure to refutation in dialogue).⁴⁰ Kuyper, we might say, emphasizes an institutional strategy: individuals prone to self-deception need to live in contexts where rival traditions of intellectual inquiry remain alive, where they can be challenged by the fully developed ramifications of such rival traditions.⁴¹

This concern for error takes place in the context of a “culture war” or cultural politics of which Kuyper is as aware as Mill. He saw his age as one of different “life systems” that were “wrestling with one another, in mortal combat.”⁴² Kuyper describes his liberal opponents as pretending to honor freedom of conscience and “adorning themselves with the honorary title of neutrality.”⁴³ This is a remarkably early contestation of the pretension of liberal neutrality. As a matter of fact, he continues, they “only misuse this motto to be able – covered by the banner of neutrality – to strike more confidently” (PO 193). Kuyper’s discussion is full of statements like these. Taken together, such statements show the extent to which we are now stuck in the same discussion as then. Like many today, Kuyper complains about the hypocrisy of those “Tolerant of all, except of those who are intolerant” (PO 193). “Everything must be tolerated,” he continues, “except for us” (PO 159). He thus rejects one type of rhetoric that still prevails in liberal societies. But his concern for error and his rejection of neutrality did not lead him to abandon freedom of expression. As his country’s leading journalist, he was in fact its most vigorous defender.

Did the earlier Christian tradition err, then, when it argued for the persecution of error? Kuyper will answer that it erred not for its rejection of error but for its confusion of spheres. Not allowing errors to persist is an adequate approach for most areas of human activity, but not for all of them in the same way. After describing that duty in different fields Kuyper asks whether the State also has “the right and duty to chasten error and to counteract its influence?” (PO 160). Both Roman Catholics and

40) See Vigo, “Platón, en torno a las condiciones.”

41) For a fruitful discussion from a MacIntyrean perspective, see Perry, “The Weight of Community.”

42) Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 11.

43) Kuyper, “Is Error a Punishable Offense,” 193. Hereafter cited parenthetically as PO.

Protestants have answered this question in the affirmative – with European governments following suit – thus implicitly or explicitly affirming that a Christian magistrate has the same duty to eradicate error as a Christian father. This dual correction of a Roman Catholic and Protestant heritage is worth emphasizing, since in other texts – even from this same year – Kuyper is rather eager to single out the Protestant Reformation as the origin of modern liberties.⁴⁴ In the newspaper articles he is instead defending a broader Christian project, and this also means correcting problems of the Christian heritage that have been present in all its confessional branches. The problem that needs to be corrected, however, is not the concern to combat error, but the confusion of spheres that sometimes pervades this pursuit.

On the other hand, it is also important to note that Kuyper does not assume that it has always been wrong for the State to be directly concerned with truth and error. Israel's history suggests otherwise. But Kuyper is obviously attentive to Israel's peculiar conditions: knowing the truth, but also having "a means to obtain certainty in dubious cases"; inner freedom of the people combined with rich public confession and worship; a State religion that is simultaneously the religion of an entire nation (PO 161). In the absence of these and other conditions, he argues, the program outlined in Milton's *Areopagitica* should prevail. This, rather than Locke's *Letter on Toleration*, was the natural place for someone concerned with freedom of the press to go. Its key themes, according to Kuyper, are the duty of government to give truth as much room as possible, the need for those who profess the truth to defend it when it appears, and to avoid the prospect of error claiming the crown of martyrdom (PO 167–168). Kuyper does not accept Milton's exclusion of atheists and Roman Catholics, but otherwise he adopts this summary of his arguments as part of his own proposal. His conclusion is thus that the government cannot be indifferent to truth claims, but "The government cannot sit in the tribunal for this spiritual tournament" (PO 182). As we can see, he is treading a difficult middle ground: he argues for a government that neither remains neutral nor sits as a judge in the spiritual contest of its people. The government has "a heart for the truth," but it cannot honor the truth by interfering. Hence its duty to "keep the arena open and free for the spiritual struggle, doing so through legisla-

44) See his 1874 speech, "Calvinism: Source and Stronghold," in Kuyper, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 279–322.

tion, dispensing justice, and governmental policy” (PO 182). This understanding of the role of the State is, as we will see in the next section, instructive of a deeper set of differences with Mill.

It is worth emphasizing that Kuyper’s look at the past in this series of articles is not purely critical. He is very concerned with describing a consistent intellectual tradition on which to build. An alternative to the model dominant in Christendom was needed, he writes, and this alternative was first developed by “an antirevolutionary,” not a liberal (PO 166). This way of referring to Milton as an “antirevolutionary” is obviously anachronistic (drawing Milton into nineteenth-century Dutch debates). In the next article, he adds that Milton was merely elaborating on Paul (PO 167). And while the modern development of such Pauline insights begins, in a sense, with the antirevolutionary Milton, it continues in a broad later tradition of thought. Kuyper refers to Burke (again an “antirevolutionary”) explicitly highlighting his defense of Methodists and Irish Catholics (PO 169).⁴⁵ In a footnote he also refers to Friedrich Julius Stahl and James Fitzjames Stephen (whom we have already mentioned as a critic of Mill). Leaving aside Stahl, this is a distinctly English tradition, and Kuyper thus concludes that we owe the tradition of freedom of conscience and expression to England rather than to the French Revolution. However, he omits Mill, whom many would have considered, and still do, as the principal English voice arguing for this freedom. He was obviously highlighting a rival understanding of how such a freedom ought to be defended.

III. Mill and Kuyper in Contrast

If one wants to classify different strands of liberalism geographically, there are two main ways of doing so: comparing the European and American traditions, or contrasting the Anglo-American and French traditions. If the focus is on the legal protection of freedom of speech, we will likely be inclined toward the first of these approaches, stressing the uniqueness of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. Kuyper’s anti-revolutionary sentiments, however, inclined him toward the second of these frameworks. What Milton called for, he writes, “was granted in Britain and America” (PO 164). He had great admiration for the American project,

45) For a discussion of Burke’s perspective, see McConnell, “Edmund Burke’s Tolerant Establishment.”

but it is not a tradition he is pitting against another European one.⁴⁶ The great divide is within Europe, and throughout his life his polemic is directed against the revolutionary understanding of liberty derived from France.⁴⁷ But just like the contrast between America and Europe, this intra-European way of framing the controversy has its downsides. Kuyper, after all, critically engages with a tradition that is also very much at home in the English-speaking world, and whose most influential version is probably that of Mill. How should we characterize it?

At this point it may be useful to consider Jacob Levy's *Rationalism, Pluralism and Freedom*. In Levy's account, two different views of intermediate groups run through the history of liberalism: one type of liberalism emphasizes the role of such groups in promoting and protecting freedom, while the other type emphasizes the threat that local group power poses to freedom. This framing of the issue is particularly helpful for our discussion, given the role that Mill plays in Levy's narrative. Mill, with his suspicion of universities and churches, is the key nineteenth-century exponent of the "rationalist" tradition in liberalism, which champions the sovereign individual and is less suspicious of the centralizing state than of local forms of authority.⁴⁸ While Levy compares this to the pluralist liberalism of Tocqueville, Kuyper shares many of Tocqueville's emphases.⁴⁹ Distinguishing between a mechanical sphere of state authority and an organic sphere of "social circles," Kuyper set out to defend the inherent authority of the various local and intermediate forms of organization:⁵⁰ authority in the social sphere, in the corporate sphere of associations, guilds and universities, in municipal autonomy and in the domestic sphere. This point was most famously defended in "Sphere Sovereignty," his inaugural conference for the Free University of Amsterdam (1880). Like the *Lectures on Calvinism* he would deliver two decades later, this conference stresses not so much the independence of these different spheres, but their authority, an "authority the State does not confer but acknowledges."⁵¹

46) For further discussion of his appreciation of America, see Bolt, *A Free Church, a Holy Nation*.

47) For excellent discussion, see Harinck and Eglinton, *Neo-Calvinism and the French Revolution*.

48) For the contrast between Tocqueville and Mill, see Levy, *Rationalism, Pluralism, and Freedom*, 212–32.

49) Parallels in their approach to the problem of poverty have been analyzed by Li Ma and Jin Li, but further comparative exploration of their social philosophy is a desideratum. See Ma and Li, "Tocqueville and Kuyper."

50) Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 94.

51) Kuyper, *A Centennial Reader*, 468.

But how does this relate to our concern for freedom of thought and discussion? It is worth noting that Mill's and Tocqueville's concern for these freedoms follows directly from their analysis of the emerging mass society. A society of equals, Tocqueville observed, is also a society of increasingly isolated individuals. In this context, intellectual authority seems to move into the heart and mind of each individual, and as long as these multiple free individuals do not agree on a view, there seems to be considerable intellectual freedom; once a consensus is reached, however, Tocqueville believed that this democratic authority would have a power that no previous government could have dreamed of. "The disposition to believe the mass increases, and more and more it is opinion that leads the world."⁵² Following an inexorable logic, the dominant opinion would thus come to rule despotically. Instead of persecuting the soul by means of torturing the body, this pressure for social conformity "leaves the body alone and goes right to the soul."⁵³ His observations about this dynamic are crucial to understanding the sources of contemporary problems with freedom of speech, like the phenomenon of censorship coming from below instead of from above.⁵⁴ Isolated individuals do not make strong, independent citizens, but rather weak individuals prone to intellectual conformity. As equality increases, Tocqueville writes, "the tendency of each blindly to believe a certain man or a certain class decreases," but simultaneously our "disposition to believe the mass increases."⁵⁵ He could hence foresee a situation in which "faith in common opinion will become a sort of religion whose prophet will be the majority," and where "under the dominion of certain laws, democracy would extinguish the intellectual liberty."⁵⁶ Tocqueville's defense of intermediate groups is closely linked to this concern. Along with religion, the "art of association" was one of the counterweights to modern individualism that he found in America. With Mill, as we have seen, things go in a different direction. He agreed with Tocqueville's description of a persecution that enslaved "the soul itself" and described this as the salient feature of "social tyranny" as opposed to political tyranny.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, his wager was that only

52) Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II, 1, 2.

53) *Ibid.*, I, 2, 7.

54) See Manning and Campbell, *The Rise of Victimhood Culture*, 50–56.

55) Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II, 1, 2.

56) *Ibid.*, II, 2, 2.

57) Mill, *On Liberty*, 219–20.

individual independence could provide an antidote to the dangers of this scenario. “Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”⁵⁸

If we look at Kuyper’s writings with this alternative between Tocqueville’s and Mill’s vision in mind, we can see the same constellation of concerns unfolding in his work. Kuyper’s defense of free speech, in other terms, is not only developed against the restrictions of speech rooted in Christendom or in the *ancien régime*, but against the threatening uniformity of the modern world. This is particularly evident in one of his first important speeches, “Uniformity: The Curse of Modern Life,” delivered in 1869. This speech is directed against the “yearning for false unity that dominates the course of world history,” and like other writings it points to the central place of the French Revolution in that process. At this point, he contends, “The bare political unity of the past was metamorphosed by the catastrophe of 1789 into a social unity.”⁵⁹ Unlike Tocqueville, his focus is not on the democratic but the revolutionary side of this modern development, but the outcome is conceived by both thinkers as social uniformity. And even in this relatively early piece, Kuyper lays out the way in which freedom of thought is to be defended in this context. Not simply by promoting individual rights of expression, but in the “free multiformity” of social plurality.⁶⁰ “Thus, with complete autonomy let groups and circles unite who know what they want, know what they confess.”⁶¹ If contemporary uniformity is partly the result of individualistic isolation, this Tocquevillian and Kuyperian project seems to be a response in the right direction.

In the later address on “Sphere Sovereignty” this argument would be significantly expanded and applied to a subject hardly touched upon by Tocqueville: universities and, more specifically, confessional universities. Here we can see the parallel between Kuyper’s understanding of freedom of speech and his reflections on academic freedom. Indeed, this later speech sets out a charter for a plurality of confessionally distinct institutions, institutions free from state and church administration, but not neutral. Barely a decade earlier, Mill had taken a very different position in his “Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St. Andrews” (1867). While he was a critic of the purely

58) Ibid., 224.

59) Kuyper, *A Centennial Reader*, 24.

60) Ibid., 39.

61) Ibid.

scientific model of the university promoted by Herbert Spencer, his project for the university was emphatically one of deconfessionalization. As Lee Ward has characterized it, Mill sought “to transform the university as an institution into an instrument of liberal statecraft.”⁶² Kuyper, in contrast, argued that “Our scholarship will be ‘free,’ therefore, not in the sense of ‘detached from its principle.’”⁶³ Kuyper’s conception of academic freedom thus stands in sharp contrast to projects that put neutrality at the center. Awareness of presuppositions is its starting point. But it is also opposed to an exclusive emphasis on individual freedom: it takes an entire academic institution to explore what the world (or a particular discipline) looks like when one starts from this or that presupposition. And citizens benefit from the existence of such institutions, which thus expose them to the mature version of an entire intellectual tradition. For its portrayal of the alternative he rejects, his speech is worth quoting at length.

Any organic thinker scoffs at the atomistic pretension that everyone, growing up, must think through all systems, search through every confession, and then choose the one he considers the best. No one can do this, and no one does. Neither the time nor the mental energy is available. Only some naif, who does not yet understand higher learning, can fancy that he or someone else has accomplished this. Such sampling of all systems merely fosters superficiality, destroys thinking, spoils character, and renders the brain unfit for more solid labor. Believe me, a firm understanding of architecture does not come from nosing about in the alleys behind the houses but from careful examination of one well-built structure, basement to attic.⁶⁴

Previous scholarship has not noted how remarkably closely Kuyper follows some of Tocqueville’s observations in *Democracy in America* (which Groen van Prinsterer had

62) Ward, “Political Significance of Higher Education,” 339.

63) Kuyper, *A Centennial Reader*, 486.

64) Ibid. This is a recurring emphasis, and with very down-to-earth consequences. A decade later, in an address to students, he still urged them to “read widely, but remember that mere browsing yields knowledge that evaporates quickly.” Kuyper, “Scholarship. Two Convocation Addresses,” 112.

encouraged him to read).⁶⁵ At the beginning of this work's second part, Tocqueville writes that a man who undertakes "to examine everything by himself would only be able to give a little time and attention to each thing; this work would keep his mind in a perpetual agitation that would prevent him from penetrating any truth deeply and from settling reliably on any certitude."⁶⁶ Tocqueville's observations on the general intellectual climate are being applied by Kuyper to the specific tasks of the university. Neither Tocqueville nor Kuyper question the importance of free intellectual inquiry, but they describe an understanding of that freedom that can corrode the intellectual skills necessary for that enterprise.⁶⁷ There is, of course, no guarantee that it will not be corroded in other ways, but overall the emphasis here is on the fact that tradition and community can sustain meaningful freedom.

Kuyper was, indeed, as aware as any of his contemporaries that intermediate groups could err in the most decisive ways. "*Sin* threatens freedom within each sphere just as strongly as *State-power* does at the boundary."⁶⁸ On balance, however, he saw a rich institutional and confessional life as a way of safeguarding freedom. This is very clear in his newspaper articles on freedom of the press. His argument rests on a sharp distinction between the duties of the state with regard to truth and the duties of the rest of society. The state has a duty to create and protect space, while organized citizens have a duty to seek the truth and to proclaim it. A free society is therefore one in which ethically minded societies – churches, for example – can also restrict persistent deviance in their midst (PO 160). Kuyper thus explicitly rejected the idea that respect for all beliefs should be at the center of *social* life. He describes this as "inexcusable thoughtlessness" (PO 171). The relationship between intellectual freedom and the various forms of community life is thus at the heart of Kuyper's proposal. Here the contrast with Mill is illuminating. As noted above, Mill's arguments in *On Liberty* rest not on a simple affirmation of the benefits of open discussion, but on the specific critique of "received opinion," "hereditary creed," "despotism of custom," and

65) For Groen's reading recommendations, see Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 75; for Groen's own reading of Tocqueville, see de Vries, "Groen van Prinsterer las Tocqueville."

66) Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II, 1, 2.

67) For a critique of Mill for ignoring that dimension of the problem, see Voegelin, "Freedom of Discussion and Readiness for Discussion."

68) Kuyper, *A Centennial Reader*, 473.

their replacement by the inquisitive and original personality. In short, while Mill's project implies some forms of uprooting, Kuyper's is explicitly framed in contrast to this goal. "The issue is not about cutting through the thread of life that binds the life of our mind together for the sake of a zeal for the freedom of thought" (PO 171). In his view, it is not a strong and original personality that emerges from such uprooting, but precisely the thoughtless superficiality that inhibits the confrontation between rival, maturely developed wisdoms.

Let us conclude with some observations on the concept of tolerance in Kuyper and Mill. It has sometimes been suggested that in Mill the concept of tolerance – in the classical sense of permitting opinions or actions one disapproves of – retreats from the center of liberal thought, to be replaced by the celebration of diversity.⁶⁹ This is partly true. In *On Liberty* he tends to treat diversity as intrinsically good, and something intrinsically good cannot be the object of toleration (failure to recognize it as a good can then even be interpreted as a sign of intolerance).⁷⁰ He did obviously not reject the concept of tolerance in an overt way, but he did contend that intolerance is natural to mankind "in whatever they really care about" and then we must conclude that religious freedom is contingent upon a context of religious indifference.⁷¹ This is not necessarily his consistent position. To the extent that he expected the future to be plural, to include contesting rival traditions, toleration in its traditional sense seems unavoidable. But whatever his expectations for the future, the fact is that he pursued two common strategies for moving beyond the concept of toleration: making diversity intrinsically good and conflating tolerance with indifference.⁷² What about Kuyper then? There is, in fact, an important similarity with Mill, in that his project of contestation between the mature and institutionally developed versions of different worldviews requires a strong presence of the concept of toleration, but the concept is largely absent also from his work.⁷³ Kuyper did not, however, pursue Mill's strat-

69) For a detailed discussion of Mill from this perspective, see Mendus, *Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism*, 44–68.

70) Mill, *On Liberty*, 260.

71) Ibid., 222.

72) For this twofold front, see Fletcher, "The Case for Tolerance."

73) John Bowlin has noted how well tolerance in fact fits with Kuyper's understanding of moral character and his social philosophy, but he does not find much textual basis in Kuyper for a discussion of the concept.

egies for leaving the concept behind. It is worth noting, moreover, that the concept is explicitly present in one place in his work, namely in the articles on freedom of the press. We have already mentioned what may seem to be the more superficial part of that discussion, the complaint about “the intolerance of the tolerants.” But this complaint is not a culture-warring slogan. It is a conclusion Kuyper arrives at after describing “the credo of our leading circles” (PO 192), the belief in the duty of the state to eradicate narrow-mindedness and fanaticism. This project obviously involves the state taking sides and identifying the root of such narrow-mindedness (a root which, Kuyper writes, is typically thought to be found in Christianity). An effectively plural society requires a rejection of this understanding of toleration, in which the state is set up to adjudicate between rival visions of the source of violence. Rejecting this project, as we have seen, does not mean that the state has no role in defending a tolerant society. If its duty is to “keep the arena open and free for the spiritual struggle, doing so through legislation, dispensing justice, and governmental policy” (PO 182) it is engaged in a specific form of toleration: not in the personal act of toleration, but in the arbitration that contemporary scholarship has identified as the specific function of state-toleration.⁷⁴

Conclusion

However much our authors may differ in their conception of liberty, there are important moments of convergence and even collaboration. Through his reviews of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, for example, Mill was instrumental in the early reception of that work in the English-speaking world.⁷⁵ We should stress, in fact, how lively this discussion was in the mid- and late- nineteenth century, and how strikingly we are still arguing along lines first laid down then. Even in confessional terms, this was already largely our world: Mill may have attacked “Calvinism,” but his critical target was a more broadly conceived Christian anthropology. Kuyper was certainly a Calvinist,

See Bowlin, “‘Here the Shoe Pinches,’” 117–37.

74) For a contemporary development of State toleration along such lines, see Laegaard, “State Toleration, Religious Recognition and Equality.”

75) For these reviews and their correspondence, see Pappé, “Mill and Tocqueville.”

but one engaged in thinking through the consequences of a shared Christian wisdom in a world that no longer divided him primarily against Catholics.

This is, moreover, a dispute among those who place significant value on public debate, a free press, and academic freedom. Will their contrasting views on such topics lead to different practical outcomes? Not always. Those who reason with the individual as their main building block, and those who focus primarily on communities and traditions, can each do justice to the other pole of concern. But sometimes it does matter which position one takes as one's starting point. If one starts from Millian assumptions in the debate over cancel culture, for example, the primary response will likely be to recruit heterodox individuals and protect their free speech. A Tocquevillian/Kuyperian approach will instead promote a pluralism grounded in the flourishing of distinct universities, each cultivating its own tradition in depth, so that confrontation in public debate takes place between mature interlocutors rather than between dissenters and a dominant majority. There are real advantages to this second view. Within a Millian framework, dissent will tend to appear mainly as individual transgression, and – *pace* Mill – it then tends to be policed accordingly. In the Kuyperian model, in contrast, dissent is carried by a tradition embodied in intermediate institutions rather than by an exposed individual.

In any case, the central question that separates these authors is not the precise extent of freedom that each believes should be granted – a question whose ultimate resolution always involves prudential judgments, and one on which philosophy and theology may have less to say than is sometimes hoped. Nor is the crucial difference that one is a secular and the other a religious thinker. Mill's religious sensibilities, we have emphasized, are tightly connected to his conception of progress, and it is that notion of progress that stands in an uneasy relationship to freedom. One can, of course, read the second chapter of *On Liberty* in isolation from the rest of the work, but once the book is read as a whole, such connections – and the contrast with other traditions of freedom – stand out. Kuyper represents one such point of contrast: a conception of freedom with more attention to the existential dangers of error, more awareness of its own presuppositions, and one that makes freedom less hostage to one's reading of where history is going. Moreover, while Kuyper is less explicit than Mill about his debt to Tocqueville, he draws more deeply from him regarding the dangers of democratic individualism. If one seeks meaningful freedom that goes beyond a "sampling

of all systems,” then our concern for freedom must include the freedom of institutions. Lastly, a Kuyperian and Tocquevillian perspective can plausibly integrate many of the arguments for freedom of discussion developed in *On Liberty*; what it does not aim to produce is the same kind of eccentric individual.

This article has aimed to make clear the continuity between that nineteenth-century discussion and our present concern with the same freedoms, and to show Kuyper’s often neglected place within it. Students of his work often note the way he developed the thought of his predecessor in Dutch politics, Groen van Prinsterer, in a more democratic and pluralistic direction. That is indeed a crucial background for understanding his thought. But it is also part of a larger European conversation, and reading Kuyper in this context – of which he was acutely aware – arguably makes his relevance to the current Western discussion more palpable.⁷⁶ As we have shown, there are significant affinities between his thought and Tocqueville’s, and he brought them to bear on the national discussion of freedom of the press and the future of academic life. Amid contemporary anxieties about the same issues, these are voices to which one fruitfully returns.

76) For an insightful recent example concerning other areas of his thought, see Pahman, “The English Kuyper and the Dutch Maurice.”

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