

Sphere Sovereignty according to Kuyper

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Abstract

This article systematically describes the principle of sphere sovereignty according to Abraham Kuyper. Four themes are critically examined: the sovereignty of Christ as the main basis of Kuyper's principle and its relation to creation, fall, and redemption; structural pluralism as the way of understanding social structure; the notion of religious and confessional pluralism; finally, the role of the state as the sphere of spheres. A positive critique of Kuyper's principle is given in conclusion.

Keywords

Sphere sovereignty, sphere of spheres, structural pluralism, confessional pluralism, creation, fall, redemption, faith, public justice

Introduction

The principle of sphere sovereignty is most often associated with Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), though he was not the first thinker to entertain it. For instance, John Calvin (1509–1564), Johannes Althusius (1563–1638), and Groen van Prinsterer (1801–1876) had already thought of it, but Kuyper was the thinker who developed the idea to its most mature expression. Compared to van Prinsterer, for example, Kuyper expanded it beyond church-state

relations, bringing it into relation with other social institutions.¹ Kuyper popularized the idea in his speech “Sphere Sovereignty” at the establishment of the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, in 1880. James Bratt considers it “the most memorable speech Abraham Kuyper delivered over a long lifetime of notable orations.”² Kuyper also implemented the principle by starting and leading an ecclesiastical denomination, founding a political party through which he would become prime minister, and setting up newspapers. George Harinck, who certainly appreciates Kuyper’s idea, concludes that it was not Kuyper’s idea but his activities that had more impact and establish his legacy, which lives on in Dutch society.³ “Kuyper was nothing,” Craig Bartholomew writes, “if not culturally and socially engaged.”⁴ Among many of Kuyper’s inspirational ideas, sphere sovereignty is the principle most discussed by theologians, political scientists, or ethicists in many countries in the West.⁵

I. *Christ as the Sovereign King*

The principle of sphere sovereignty rests in the sovereignty of Jesus Christ. Kuyper defines sovereignty as “the authority that has the right, the duty, and the power to break and avenge all resistance to its will”⁶ Kuyper distinguishes between sphere sovereignty and absolute sovereignty, which rests only in God. “If you believe in Him as Deviser and Creator, as Founder and Director of all things, your soul must also proclaim the Triune God as the only absolute Sovereign.” The sovereignty of God “has been conferred absolute and undivided upon the man-Messiah.” Christ is “the *Messiah*, the Anointed, and thus the *King* of kings possessing ‘all authority in heaven and on earth.’” Absolute sovereignty is authority and power “extending over all things visible and invisible, over the spiritual and the material.”⁷ The

¹ Johan D. Van der Vyver, “The Jurisprudential Legacy of Abraham Kuyper and Leo XIII,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 5.1 (2002): 213.

² James D. Bratt, “Sphere Sovereignty among Abraham Kuyper’s Other Political Theories,” in *The Kuyper Center Review: Politics, Religion, and Sphere Sovereignty*, ed. Gordon Graham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 34.

³ George Harinck, “A Historian’s Comment on the Use of Abraham Kuyper’s Idea of Sphere Sovereignty,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 5.1 (2002): 277.

⁴ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition: A Systematic Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 131.

⁵ Hak Joon Lee, “From Onto-Theology to Covenant: A Reconstruction of Abraham Kuyper’s Theory of Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Public Theology for a Global Society: Essays in Honor of Max L. Stackhouse*, ed. Deidre King Hainsworth and Scott R. Paeth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 2010), 87.

⁶ Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 466.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 464, 466–68.

emphasis on Christ as king is important, compared to the view of liberal Christians, who favor the office of Christ as prophet, and that of pietists, who stress Jesus as “savior and healer of souls.”⁸ Kuyper fills a lacuna in the history of the Christian understanding of Christ.

That Christ is sovereign in heaven is evident, but Kuyper emphasizes three words in Matthew 28:18: “and on earth.”⁹ Govert Buijs writes, “Christ as (spiritual) King gathers on earth a people that is subject to him, is obedient to him. It is not an earthly people, and yet it is (also) a people on earth.” Kuyper declares, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over *all*, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”¹⁰ “The dominion of Jesus’ kingship extends also to family, society, state, scholarship, art, and every other sphere of human activity.”¹¹

Christ as the sovereign king dominates all spheres of human life through the delegation of sovereignty to human beings. “Sovereignty rests in God,” Kuyper says, “and can therefore proceed only from Him.”¹² Christ has delegated his sovereignty “by dividing [our] life into *separate spheres*, each with its own sovereignty.”¹³ While Christ possesses absolute sovereignty, each sphere has a delegated sovereignty, and “human freedom is safe under this Son of Man anointed as Sovereign because, along with the State, every other sphere of life recognizes an authority derived from Him—that is, possesses sovereignty in its own sphere.”¹⁴ Since the state, with other sovereign spheres, receives sovereignty from Christ, the “perfect Sovereignty of the *sinless* Messiah at the same time directly denies and challenges all absolute Sovereignty among *sinful* men on earth.”¹⁵ The principle of sphere sovereignty rejects the Hegelian system of the state as “the immanent God.”¹⁶ “All authority of governments on earth originates from the sovereignty of God alone.”¹⁷ Sphere sovereignty also rejects the liberal system of Caesarism which derives from popular sovereignty. “Therefore in opposition both to the atheistic popular-sovereignty of the Encyclopedists, and the pantheistic

⁸ Clifford Anderson, introduction to Abraham Kuyper, *Pro Rege* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham; Acton Institute, 2016), 1:xiv.

⁹ Govert J. Buijs, introduction to Abraham Kuyper, *Pro Rege* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham; Acton Institute, 2017), 2:xviii.

¹⁰ Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 488.

¹¹ Abraham Kuyper, *Pro Rege*, trans. Albert Gootjes (Bellingham, WA: Lexham; Acton Institute, 2016), 2:264.

¹² Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 468.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 467.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 468.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 467.

¹⁶ Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 466.

¹⁷ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), 82.

state-sovereignty of German philosophers, the Calvinist maintains the Sovereignty of God, as the source of all authority among men.”¹⁸

God delegates sovereignty to social spheres in the creation. The “second sovereignty,” after the sovereignty of the state, is “implanted by God in the social spheres, in accordance with the ordinances of creation.”¹⁹ It is “in the order of creation, in the structure of human life; it was there before State sovereignty arose.”²⁰ In *Our Program*, Kuyper explains how God delegates sovereignty to nature and to human beings. God has established the law of nature to exercise sovereignty over material objects, such as the strong over the weak.²¹ The law of nature is also the authority in climate and soil over the world of plants, and in the animal world one may have authority over another. In our individual persons, there is a law that directs our blood and body, and the power of logic has authority over our judgments. The role of Christ is not as the founder but as the protector of sphere sovereignty.²²

While affirming that sphere sovereignty is rooted in the order of creation, Kuyper says little about the basis for believing it.²³ Herman Bavinck tries to fill this gap:

Everything was created with its own nature and is based on ordinances appointed by God for it. Sun and moon and stars have their own peculiar tasks; plants and animals and man have their own distinct natures. There is a rich diversity. But in this diversity, there is also a supreme unity. ... Every creature received its own nature, its own life, and its own law of life.²⁴

¹⁸ Ibid., 90.

¹⁹ Ibid., 94.

²⁰ Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 469.

²¹ Abraham Kuyper, *Our Program*, trans. Harry van Dyke (Bellingham, WA: Lexham; Acton Institute, 2015), 20.

²² Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 469.

²³ Cf. Richard J. Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship: Essays in the Line of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012). Whether the principle of sphere sovereignty is consistent with the biblical teaching and the Reformed tradition, Kuyper says, “Should anyone ask whether ‘sphere sovereignty’ is really derived from the heart of the Scripture and the treasury of Reformed life, I would entreat him first of all to plumb the depths of the organic *faith principle* in Scripture, further to note Hebron’s tribal law for David’s coronation, to notice Elijah’s resistance to Ahab’s tyranny, the disciples’ refusal to yield to Jerusalem’s police regulations, and, not least, to listen to their Lord’s maxim concerning what is God’s and what is Caesar’s. As to Reformed life, don’t you know about Calvin’s ‘lesser magistrates’? Isn’t sphere sovereignty the basis of the entire Presbyterian church order? Did not almost all Reformed nations incline toward a confederative form of government? Are not civil liberties most luxuriantly developed in Reformed lands? Can it be denied that domestic peace, decentralization, and municipal autonomy are best guaranteed even today among the heirs of Calvin?” See Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 480–81.

²⁴ Quoted in Gordon Spykman, “Sphere Sovereignty in Calvin and the Calvinist Tradition,” in *Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. David Holwerda (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 179–80.

In my opinion, both Kuyper and Bavinck ground sphere sovereignty on Genesis 1:11–12, on “each according to its kind.” Sovereignty owned by each social sphere is given by God in the order of creation.

The human fall into sin destroys God’s original design of sphere sovereignty. Firstly, sin brings an aspiration to uniformity into human life. Though “unity is the ultimate goal of all the ways of God,”²⁵ Kuyper still acknowledges the intrinsic difference of forms and configurations in life. Only God “one day” can and will “lead from all this diversity toward unity, out of this chaos toward order ... all dissonances [resolving] into harmony.” Alas, the world “in its sinful endeavor has arrogated this ideal for itself. The world, too, strives for unity.” Worldly unity is “a false uniformity.” In the “history of sin,” human beings have tried to achieve false uniformity in “an imperial unity.” Kuyper mentions some examples: Nebuchadnezzar, Alexander the Great, the Caesars of Rome, Louis XIV, Napoleon, and Otto von Bismarck, Kuyper’s contemporary. False uniformity is a kind of “curse,” since the imposition of uniformity eliminates diversity and destroys the richness of life.²⁶ The problem with imperial uniformity and centralism is the invasion of the state over other social spheres, violating Christ’s absolute sovereignty and destroying sphere sovereignty. Thus Kuyper seeks to keep the state to its own sphere. Historically speaking, “State sovereignty recognized Sphere sovereignty as a permanent adversary, and within the spheres the power of resistance was weakened by the transgression of their own laws of being, that is, by sin.” Imperial or dictatorial governments have invaded other social spheres in order to achieve their own political ambitions. “Hence also rises the danger that one sphere in life may encroach on its neighbor like a sticky wheel that shears off one cog after another until the whole operation is disrupted.”²⁷ The final effect is that “the whole operation is disrupted.”

Kuyper acknowledges the impact of sin in human social spheres. “Sin here also has exerted its disturbing influence and has distorted much which was intended for a blessing into a curse.”²⁸ Thanks to common grace provided by God, this “fatal efficiency of sin has been stopped.” Common grace not only negatively resists the destructive effects of sin but also positively endorses the development of civil good and righteousness.

²⁵ Abraham Kuyper, “Uniformity: The Curse of Modern Life,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. Bratt, 21.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 23, 32, 35.

²⁷ Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 468.

²⁸ Kuyper, *Lectures*, 91.

Redemption by Christ has a cosmic scope in the restoration of sphere sovereignty. In Colossians 1:20 (ESV), Paul says, "... through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." Christ's redemptive work is not restricted to the individual benefits of salvation from sin but extends to "the redemption of the world, and to the organic reunion of all things in heaven and on earth under Christ as their original head."²⁹ It "reestablishes the proper function of family, religious life, state, and all other institutions."³⁰ Christ works first as "the original Mediator of creation and after that also [as] the Mediator of redemption to make possible the enforcement and fulfillment of the decree of creation and everything entailed in it."³¹ Sphere sovereignty, rooted in the order of creation of which Christ is mediator, is restored by Christ the mediator of redemption. Christ's redemptive work is also in "transforming the world, turning oppression into freedom, injustice into justice, hatred into love, oppressive swords into plowshares—although always partly and provisionally."³² Christians should not be silent about social injustices in which "God's original intention for his creation is violated," but should enter the fallen world to develop each social sphere according to its nature and make human life flourish. Each social sphere is ontologically related within a structural pluralism.

II. *The Principle of Structural Pluralism*

Structural pluralism means that "God has created the world with various structures ... which order life and coordinate human interaction."³³ These include family, government, church, school, and so forth. This term correctly describes the principle of sphere sovereignty. Kuyper believed that "Our human life, with its visible material foreground and invisible spiritual background, is neither simple nor uniform but constitutes an infinitely complex organism." This complexity "is so structured that the individual exists only in groups." The parts of this complex organism are "cogwheels,' spring-driven on their own axles, or 'spheres,' each animated with its own

²⁹ Ibid., 119.

³⁰ Corwin Smidt, "The Principled Pluralist Perspective," in *Church, State, and Public Justice: Five Views*, ed. P. C. Kemeny (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 133.

³¹ Abraham Kuyper, "Common Grace," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. Bratt, 185.

³² Buijs, introduction, xxvi.

³³ Gordon Spykman, "The Principled Pluralist Position," in *God and Politics: Four Views on the Reformation of Civil Government*, ed. Gary Scott Smith (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1989), 79.

spirit.” Kuyper gives some examples of these cogwheels or spheres: the scientific world, the business world, the art world, ecclesiastical life; each “comprises its own *domain*. ... Each has its own Sovereign within its bounds.” Each sphere “obeys its own laws of life, each subject to its own chief.”³⁴ They “do not owe their existence to the state, and do not derive the law of their life from the superiority of the state, but obey a high authority within their own bosom; an authority which rules, by the grace of God, just as the sovereignty of the State does.” There is an authority within each sphere to which the rest is subjected, and nothing outside can posit a place inside a sphere except God himself.³⁵ Gordon Spykman comments, “Each sphere has its own identity, its own unique task, its own God-given prerogatives. On each God has conferred its own peculiar right of existence and reason for existence.”³⁶

Kuyper differentiates between the mechanical character of the state and the organic character of the society. Whatever human beings receive directly from creation is organically and spontaneously developed, as illustrated by the family with its blood relationship. Government is directly appointed by God and does not have “a natural head, which organically grew from the body of the people, but a *mechanical* head, which from without has been placed upon the trunk of the nation.”³⁷ The organic character, on the other hand, develops spontaneously “not by the law of inheritance or by appointment, but only by the grace of God.” Kuyper gives some examples. In the sphere of science or art a genius or maestro receives capability by the grace of God, and “is subject to no one and is responsible to Him alone Who has granted this ascendancy,” and will “rule over all and in the end receive from all the homage.”³⁸ Kuyper’s doctrine of common grace comes to play on the main stage, as an abundant grace upon persons, an authority delegated by the sovereign Lord. The sphere is sovereign, since it obeys its own laws of life, subject to its own authority.

Each sphere has its own laws of life and its own authority; they are not independent of each other but related. As parts of a complex organism “the cogwheels of all these spheres engage each other, and precisely through that interaction emerges the rich, multifaceted multiformity of human life.”³⁹ Each sphere may enrich others and finally enrich human life. A family that

³⁴ Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 467.

³⁵ Kuyper, *Lectures*, 90–91.

³⁶ Spykman, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 167.

³⁷ Kuyper, *Lectures*, 92–93.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁹ Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 467–68.

functions well provides its members with spiritual, psychological, and physical readiness and maturity for engagement in other spheres: business, art, religion, science, and so forth.⁴⁰ Therefore the principle of sphere sovereignty, also called “principled pluralism,” proposes that human beings live within—borrowing Spykman’s expression—“a network of divinely ordained life-relationship.”⁴¹ People fulfill their callings in “the plurality of communal associations,” rather than receiving meaning from a collectivist megastructure institution, a “central bureaucratic seat of authority,” or by autonomous sovereign individuality.⁴² Sphere sovereignty or principled pluralism affirms the vital role of communities in a healthy society and distances itself from both laissez-faire liberalism and socialist or nationalist collectivism.⁴³

Structural pluralism is “normative” since each sphere is a part of the original order of creation.⁴⁴ Thus, the principle of sphere sovereignty endorses structural pluralism as something “good.”⁴⁵ This normative good exists because it is established by God, but also because it functions for empowering mediating structures, “those institutions standing between the individual in his private life and the large institutions of public life.”⁴⁶ These are essential in assisting the “megastructures” of societal life to work for human flourishing. Referring to Peter Berger, Richard Mouw writes, “States and corporations need to look ‘below’ themselves for ‘moral sustenance,’ providing room for the significant influence of those ‘living subcultures from which people derive meaning and identity.’” Kuyper’s principle of sphere sovereignty, however, goes beyond the present-day discussion on mediating structures. Mouw adds, “Kuyper is not merely interested in strengthening mediating structures; he also wants to understand that these so-called mediating structures are themselves organizational manifestations of more basic spheres of interaction.”⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Kent A. Van Til, “Abraham Kuyper and Michael Walzer: The Justice of the Spheres,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 40.2 (November 2005): 274.

⁴¹ Spykman, “Principled,” 79.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Smidt, “Principled,” 140.

⁴⁴ Benyamin F. Intan, “Religious Freedom and the Pancasila-Based State of Indonesia: A Neo-Calvinist Idea of Principled Pluralism,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 54.1 (2019): 64.

⁴⁵ Smidt, “Principled,” 137.

⁴⁶ Peter L. Berger and Richard J. Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy, 1977), 158.

⁴⁷ Mouw, *Cultural Discipleship*, 37.

III. *The Principle of Confessional Pluralism*

Confessional pluralism refers to “the right of the various religious groups that make up a society to develop their own patterns of involvement in public life through their own associations—schools, political parties, labor unions, churches, and so on—to promote their views.”⁴⁸ Kuyper affirms confessional pluralism in several ways. Firstly, his notion of Christ’s kingship and the eschatological unity: the true unity of all creatures or all human beings will be accomplished by Christ at the end of the history. In maintaining freedom of conscience, Kuyper endorses avoiding “coercion in all spiritual matters” and replacing it with “persuasion.”⁴⁹ Coercion on religious matters, for Kuyper, is Christ’s eschatological prerogative: “Someday there will be coercion, when Christ descends in majesty from the heavens, breaks the anti-Christian powers with a rod of iron He has a right to this because he knows the hearts of all and will be the judge of all. But *we do not*. To us it is only given to fight with spiritual weapons and to bear our cross in joyful discipleship.”⁵⁰ Kuyper encourages us to accept “the position of equality before the law” with those who hold a different worldview. Recalling van Prinsterer’s thinking, he asks for a guarantee of constitutional liberty for the performance of religious duty by citizens. It means, as indicated by Spykman, the state must secure freedom of religion for all citizens. The tolerance based on Christ role is “eschatological tolerance.”⁵¹ Jesus’s parable in Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43 shows the antithesis of “good seed” and “weeds” which “both grow until the harvest” (v. 30). Jesus explains the meaning of the parable, “The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age” (vv. 39–40). It is not our task to deal with “the weeds” in the here and now.

Going from the eschatological fulfillment of Christ’s kingship to the alpha point, God created human beings with religious sense. Following Calvin, Kuyper believed that all human beings are “by nature ‘incurably religious.’”⁵² “If faith is to be a human reality in the regenerate, it must be an attitude (*habitus*) of our human nature as such; consequently it must have been present in the first man; and it must still be discernible in the sinner.”⁵³ We

⁴⁸ Spykman, “Principled,” 79.

⁴⁹ Abraham Kuyper, “Maranatha,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. Bratt, 219–20.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 220 (emphasis added).

⁵¹ Spykman, “Principled,” 85–86.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵³ Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology: Its Principles*, trans. J. Hendrik de Vries (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1898), 266.

can see in human beings what Kuyper calls “ethical powers” and “the pistic element,” however private and sinful.⁵⁴ Every person unavoidably owns faith: “Every act of thought or observation ... can only be established in us by faith,” and “human intercourse is founded” upon it.⁵⁵ He adds, “All knowledge proceeds from faith of whatever kind” and “Faith consecrates [a person] in the depths of his being.” He concludes, “The person who does not believe, does not exist.”⁵⁶ Nor is faith an abstract set of philosophical presuppositions.⁵⁷ “He who cleaves to something holds himself fast to it, leans upon and trusts in it.”⁵⁸ The notion of holding, leaning, and trusting indicates that for Kuyper, faith is “a deeply intimate, relational, and even mystical” dependency on something.⁵⁹ Since faith “is and will always be the expression of what is central in our lives,”⁶⁰ it is a violation of human rights if the state does not provide freedom of religion, including the freedom to express religion in some social spheres.

Matthew Kaemingk considers that Kuyper is criticizing the modern claim to religious neutrality, and Nicholas Wolterstorff notes that he is “‘challenging the Lockean model’ of the liberal public square ‘at its very foundation.’”⁶¹ For Kuyper, modern liberals who label themselves nonreligious or secular are religious. “However much they rage against dogmas, they are themselves *the most stubborn dogmatists*. A dogma, after all, is a proposition that you want others to accept on pain of being proven wrong.”⁶² Their dogma, “the modern worldview,” is taught through “the Catechism of Rousseau and Darwin.”⁶³ Kuyper mentions the presence of “doctrinaire democrats” who hold to a system which is “the logical consequence of the Revolution principle of utter self-sufficiency.” He calls to our attention the presence of

⁵⁴ In his lecture “Calvinism and Science,” Kuyper shows the important role of faith. He says, “Every science presupposes faith in self, in our self-consciousness; presupposes faith in the accurate working of our senses; presupposes faith in the correctness of the laws of thought; presupposes faith in something universal hidden behind the special phenomena; presupposes faith in life; and especially presupposes faith in the principles, from which we proceed; which signifies that all these indispensable axioms, needed in a productive scientific investigation, do not come to us by proof, but are established in our judgment by our inner conception and *given with our self-consciousness*.” See Kuyper, *Lectures*, 131.

⁵⁵ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 132, 134.

⁵⁶ Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 467, 486.

⁵⁷ Matthew Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 95.

⁵⁸ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 128.

⁵⁹ Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality*, 95.

⁶⁰ Kuyper, “Common Grace,” 198.

⁶¹ Quoted in Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality*, 97.

⁶² Abraham Kuyper, “Modernism: A *Fata Morgana* in the Christian Domain,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. Bratt, 115 (emphasis added).

⁶³ Kuyper, *Lectures*, 189.

“the sectarian school of the modernists,” “a counter church.”⁶⁴ If liberals or modernists use the public sphere to share their worldview and have their own social institutions, they are religious and like all religions must benefit from the opportunities of the public sphere.

If human beings cannot live without faith or religion, many worldviews or religious expressions in the public sphere can logically coexist. Kuyper does not want to deny the diversity of faith in the world, but that does not mean that he “celebrates” it. He thanks God for many types of diversity, including in Christian churches, but does not thank God for the diversity of religious beliefs.⁶⁵ In more contemporary language, “Confessional pluralism simply reflects the recognition that it is not the function of the state to discern the ultimate truth for those under its rule. This recognition of confessional pluralism does not, for principled pluralists, constitute *an acceptance of relativism*.”⁶⁶ Though Kuyper does not celebrate religious relativism, it does not imply that he encourages the government to defend sound doctrine. Here, Kuyper does not agree with Calvin or with article 36 of the Belgic Confession.⁶⁷ Though Calvin does not want to surrender the right to decide the matters of religion to the civil government, he encourages civil government “to defend the sound doctrine of piety.”⁶⁸ Here, government is called to protect right doctrine and punish those who violate it. In his address *Calvinism: Source and Stronghold of Our Constitutional Liberty*, Kuyper affirms that “it was [Calvin’s] position that no heresy be tolerated on major points of the Christian confessions but that deviations on minor matters had to be tolerated.” Thus, though Calvin did not tolerate heresy as deviation from major doctrines, there have been many variations since then, by the Huguenots, the Dutch republicans, and the American constitutions.⁶⁹ Kuyper certainly affirms Calvinism’s contribution to freedom of conscience.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Kuyper, *Our Program*, 191–93.

⁶⁵ Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality*, 102–3.

⁶⁶ Smidt, “Principled,” 139 (emphasis added).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 135. Part of article 36 of the Belgic Confession reads, “And the government’s task is not limited to caring for and watching over the public domain but extends also to upholding the sacred ministry, with a view to removing and destroying all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist; to promoting the kingdom of Jesus Christ; and to furthering the preaching of the gospel everywhere; to the end that God may be honored and served by everyone, as he requires in his Word.”

⁶⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 4.20.3–2.

⁶⁹ Abraham Kuyper, “Calvinism: Source and Stronghold of Our Constitutional Liberties,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. Bratt, 304–5.

⁷⁰ Kuyper certainly disagrees with elements of article 36 of the Belgic Confession. In 1905, Kuyper had some words removed from his church’s confession and the article amended. Kuyper, *Our Program*, 64, n. 8.

That Kuyper's attitude does not celebrate the diversity of religious faith is shown by his notion of antithesis between sinners and believers. "The faith life of the sinner is turned away from God in ἀπιστία and attaches itself to something creaturely, in which it seeks support against God." The believer's faith, "which was originally directed only to the manifestation of God in the soul, was now to be directed to the manifestation of God in the flesh, and thus become faith in Christ."⁷¹ Kuyper also describes the antithesis between evolution as a worldview and Christianity.⁷² "The Antithesis is present in our science and our art, in our jurisprudence and our pedagogy. It penetrates everything; everywhere it asserts itself in two directions."⁷³ Thus, instead of prescribing the pluralism of faith, Kuyper says, "Ideological fragmentation and division is simply the reality of life lived after the fall into sin."⁷⁴ The conviction of Christ's authority until eschatological unity allowed Kuyper to cooperate with other religious politicians (such as the Roman Catholic Herman Schaepman [1844–1903]). Collaboration not only can achieve some political ends but also may "avert much evil." "Excessive divisions weaken and fragment our national strength."⁷⁵ Instead of antithesis, political coalitions might be built on the basis of God's common grace. Bratt explains Kuyper's reason for developing this doctrine in *De Heraut* over six years: "Faith-based politics [seeks] common ground with people of fundamentally different convictions—at least to establish mutual intelligibility and respect for the rules of the game, and at most to build coalitions on issues of common interest."⁷⁶

Confessional pluralism does not simply recognize the unavoidable diversity of religions in the present world but also affirms the public nature of religions. Kuyper believes that "every kind of faith has in itself an impulse to speak out"⁷⁷ and encourages integrity in thought, speech, and deed, both in private and in public life: "You cannot be a human of one piece, a person of character and intelligence, and still allow yourself to be tempted to split

⁷¹ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 280–81.

⁷² Kuyper says, "Evolution is a newly conceived system, a newly established theory, a newly formed dogma, a newly emerged faith. Embracing and dominating all of life, it is diametrically opposed to the Christian faith and can erect its temple only upon the ruins of our Christian Confession." Abraham Kuyper, "Evolution," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. Bratt, 439, cf. 429–30; see also Bartholomew, *Contours*, 25.

⁷³ Abraham Kuyper, "Kuyper on Coalitions and Antithesis (1909)," trans. Harry van Dyke, *All of Life Redeemed*, <https://www.alloffiferedeemed.co.uk/Kuyper/AK-CoalitionsAntithesis.pdf>, 11–18.

⁷⁴ Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality*, 103.

⁷⁵ Kuyper, "Coalitions," 11–18.

⁷⁶ James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 198.

⁷⁷ Kuyper, *Lectures*, 131.

your conscience in two, professing your God in one half and in the other half bowing before laws that have nothing to do with him. That does not comport with reason nor does it square with your conscience.”⁷⁸ So “to ask a Christian to privatize his or her faith and behave like a liberal in the public square was no minor request; for Kuyper it was a command to convert.”⁷⁹ Kuyper emphasizes that “whatever you may choose, whatever you are ... you have to be it consistently ... in your entire world- and life-view; in the full reflection of the whole world-picture from the mirror of your human consciousness.”⁸⁰ He envisions “a diverse public square in which faiths could advocate for their convictions, could build their institutions, and could live out their unique cultural practices.”⁸¹

IV. *The State as the Sphere of Spheres*

The principle of sphere sovereignty posits the state in its own place, occupying its own sphere without invading others. Kuyper encourages the state to become “the sphere of spheres.”⁸² He emphasizes that “in a nobler sense, not for itself but on behalf of the other spheres, it seeks to strengthen its arm and with that outstretched arm to resist, to try to break, any sphere’s drive to expand and dominate a wider domain.” In more detail, he explains later that the state has three main functions.⁸³ The first is whenever “different spheres clash, to compel mutual regard for the boundary-lines of each.” The second is to “defend individuals and the weak ones, in those spheres, against the abuse of power of the rest.” The third is to “coerce all together to bear personal and financial burdens for the maintenance of the natural unity of the State.” The state plays a vital role in maintaining the principle of sphere sovereignty, that each sphere occupy its own place, that authority in each sphere be not abusive within the sphere, and that each sphere be involved in maintaining the natural unity of the state. In Mouw’s words, the first is “the adjudication of intersphere boundary disputes”; the second is about the “intrasphere conflict”; the third is on the “transpherical patterns.”⁸⁴ Regarding the first, the state “must provide for sound mutual interaction among the various spheres, insofar as they are externally manifest, and keep

⁷⁸ Kuyper, *Our Program*, 31.

⁷⁹ Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality*, 114.

⁸⁰ Kuyper, *Lectures*, 134.

⁸¹ Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality*, 114.

⁸² Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 472.

⁸³ Kuyper, *Lectures*, 97.

⁸⁴ Mouw, *Cultural Discipleship*, 36.

them within just limits.” In the second, because of sin, “personal life can be suppressed by the group in which one lives, the state must protect the individual from the tyranny of his own circle.”⁸⁵ In the third, we can mention an example as simple as “roads,” which “are used to conduct the affairs of many spheres.”⁸⁶ The state assures an individual’s constitutional liberty and that he or she may not be forced to join or to withdraw from an association.⁸⁷ In short, the state has to fulfill the task of “promoting public justice between the communities.”⁸⁸ Public justice is the “enforcement of the fulfilment of public offices and the protection of persons and groups from interference from others.”⁸⁹ Referring to Proverbs 29:4, Kuyper argues that the state has the task of giving “stability to the land by justice”⁹⁰ as “the administrator of public justice and righteousness.”⁹¹ Referring to Psalms 72 and 82, Spykman stresses the function of the state in Kuyper as “the public defender of the powerless.” The righteous and just God favors the poor and the weak not because they are “better” or holier than the rich but, as the Bible often shows, because they are “the victims of injustice and unrighteous discrimination.”⁹² This is the state’s main task regarding structural pluralism, but it also secures confessional pluralism, in the freedom of conscience and freedom of religion in civil society and the public sphere.

To perform this glorious task, Kuyper proposes a suitable constitution: “Here exactly lies the starting-point for that cooperation of the sovereignty of the government, with the sovereignty in the social sphere, which finds its regulation in the Constitution.” The constitution or “the Law has to indicate the rights of each, and the rights of the citizens over their own purses must remain the invincible bulwark against the abuse of power on the part of the government.” Kuyper also considers that the representative system promotes sphere sovereignty: “It remains the duty of those Assemblies [or the general house of representatives] to maintain the popular rights and liberties, of all and in the name of all, *with* and if need be *against* the government.”⁹³ Regarding the funding of civil society, Kuyper was once against state funding. He anticipated the influence of money on power. “Money creates power *for*

⁸⁵ Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 468. See also Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality*, 130.

⁸⁶ Mouw, *Cultural Discipleship*, 36.

⁸⁷ Kuyper, *Our Program*, 158.

⁸⁸ Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality*, 129; Bartholomew, *Contours*, 139.

⁸⁹ Timothy Keene, “Kuyper and Dooyeweerd: Sphere Sovereignty and Modal Aspects,” *Transformation* 3.1 (2016): 74.

⁹⁰ Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 468.

⁹¹ Spykman, “Principled,” 87.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 87–88.

⁹³ Kuyper, *Lectures*, 97.

the one who gives *over* the one who receives.”⁹⁴ Later, he modified his position regarding state funding in civil society. Without discriminating between religious worldviews or imposing an ideology, the state guarantees access to social services, education, and health care.⁹⁵

V. Critical Assessment

Now to some critical comments on sphere sovereignty. In general, Kuyper lacks what Buijs calls “the art of discernment.” Though affirming that the fundamental framework is “still highly relevant and basically sound,” Buijs recognizes the lack of “self-examination and self-critique and . . . humility as well.”⁹⁶ This problem was also pointed out by Rob Woltjer, who said at Kuyper’s funeral, “For the official academic world Kuyper has been more an object of study than a subject. . . . He was never taken seriously as an academic.”⁹⁷ That is why, unlike his colleague Bavinck, Kuyper was never elected a member of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences. Buijs then suggests that Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977) was “undoubtedly Kuyper’s most gifted intellectual successor.” Dooyeweerd “set out to develop a much more sophisticated and self-critical art of discernment, entering into a critical dialogue with both contemporary philosophy and a wide range of empirical sciences, in order to discover some universal principles that perhaps can be called ‘creational.’”⁹⁸

One of Kuyper’s problems of definition concerns the meaning and nature of what he meant by creational spheres. Mouw mentions how “navigation” and “agriculture” are considered spheres at the same level as science, art, or the family.⁹⁹ Buijs has also mentioned the “moral world”¹⁰⁰ and how to make a case for its institutional authority. In Bartholomew’s words, “Another issue that needs clarification is the precise nature of a sphere and the number of spheres.”¹⁰¹ With a very dense schedule and work load, Kuyper understandably lacked precision.

⁹⁴ Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 478.

⁹⁵ Kaemingk, *Christian Hospitality*, 131.

⁹⁶ Buijs, introduction, xxix.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Harinck, “Historian’s Comment,” 277. Rob Woltjer (1878–1955) was a lecturer at the Vrije Universiteit.

⁹⁸ Buijs, introduction, xxxi.

⁹⁹ Mouw, *Cultural Discipleship*, 38; see also Kuyper, *Lectures*, 96.

¹⁰⁰ I owe this insight to a personal discussion with Govert Buijs. Cf. Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 467.

¹⁰¹ Bartholomew, *Contours*, 157.

The very idea of sphere sovereignty, however, still has much to offer. Historically speaking, the inaugural speech, “Sphere Sovereignty,” with its context and purpose, was inspirational; as Bratt points out, it was “a heroic narrative of world history” and “an alternative model of perception and interpretation.” Kuyper inspired many people, including Dooyeweerd, who would later develop his principle into a more systematic and sophisticated philosophy of reality and society. As narrative, the speech contained some “ultimate values.” As epistemology, it provided a rich articulation, “being embedded in cultural or social psychological context.” Despite its inspirational, heroic, and alternative mold, however, Bratt finds that it gave “very modest biblical evidence and a minimum of theological elaboration.”¹⁰² As Mouw indicates, not only was there a lack of precision then, but Kuyper did not clarify his definition even in his lectures delivered eighteen years later. This lacuna opened a space for Dooyeweerd’s elaboration.

Dooyeweerd truly appreciated Kuyper’s principle of sphere sovereignty. Compared to van Prinsterer’s historicism, Kuyper consistently held up the scriptural, creational principle. For Dooyeweerd, Kuyper was influenced by historicism mainly in putting municipalities and provinces found in Dutch history in the general list, along with the family, school, art, and so forth. Dooyeweerd moved beyond Kuyper to differentiate between the principle of whole and part and the principle of sphere sovereignty. He understood municipalities and provinces to be “truly ‘autonomous’ parts of the state.” As the parts of the state, their authority is delegated by the whole (the state). While the autonomy of the parts depends on “the requirements of the whole,” sphere sovereignty “is rooted in the constant, inherent character of the life sphere itself.”¹⁰³ By differentiating between the principle of the whole and part and the principle of sphere sovereignty, Dooyeweerd clarified the meaning of the notion “sphere,” excluding municipalities and provinces.

According to James Skillen and Rockne McCarthy, Dooyeweerd provides a further substantial development for the principle of sphere sovereignty with the idea of double horizons in “creation’s ontic structure,” namely, “the identity structure of social reality” and “the modal structure of reality.”¹⁰⁴ Modal aspects consist of “number, space, motion, organic life, emotional feeling, logical distinction, historical development of culture, symbolic

¹⁰² Bratt, “Sphere Sovereignty,” 35, 41; see also Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist*, 133.

¹⁰³ Herman Dooyeweerd, “Roots of Western Culture,” in *Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society*, ed. James W. Skillen and Rockne M. McCarthy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 289–90.

¹⁰⁴ Skillen and McCarthy, *Political Order*, 403–4.

signification, social interaction, economic value, aesthetic harmony, law, moral valuation, and certainty of faith.”¹⁰⁵ Each social institution or association (the first horizon) has its own qualifying aspect (the second horizon). The sovereignty of each social institution comprises its own qualifying aspect.¹⁰⁶ For example, the family is “qualified” distinctively from the state or a business company in its normative existence as “a community of kinship love.” Thus, each social institution or association has its own “ontological identity.”¹⁰⁷ There are three important elements in Dooyeweerd’s philosophy of social ontology: “the mutual irreducibility, inner connection, and inseparable coherence of all the aspects of reality in the order of time.” He adds,

While this aspect is irreducible to the others, sovereign in its own sphere, and subject to its own sphere of divine laws (the laws for logical thought), it nevertheless reveals its internal nature and its conformity to law only in an unbreakable coherence with all the other aspects of reality.

The “universal coherence and inter-connection” is called “sphere universality.”¹⁰⁸

The notion of a qualifying aspect that is irreducible for each social institution provides a more systematic and more sophisticated way of understanding the meaning of “sphere” in the principle of sphere sovereignty. Therefore, the main task of the so-called “megastructures,” such as the state, the church, and the market, is in avoiding conflation of social structures and rather recognizing and respecting the structural integrity of each social sphere. Since each social institution has its own irreducible, ontological identity, social structures stand in “a coordinate relationship to each other.” Jonathan Chaplin draws a consequence: there is no one institution that has a “superior value” compared to other institutions, and no institution is more perfect than others. “All are equally dignified expressions of the divine purpose for human society,” and, as Chaplin comments, “we might say that all have a ‘divine right’ to exist and flourish.”¹⁰⁹

The meaning of a sovereign sphere in Dooyeweerdian thought furthers and clarifies the Kuyperian scheme. The coordinate relationships in

¹⁰⁵ Dooyeweerd, “Roots of Western Culture,” 278.

¹⁰⁶ Jonathan Chaplin, *Herman Dooyeweerd: Christian Philosopher of State and Civil Society* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 145.

¹⁰⁷ Skillen and McCarthy, *Political Order*, 404–5.

¹⁰⁸ Dooyeweerd, “Roots of Western Culture,” 281, 282–83.

¹⁰⁹ Chaplin, *Herman Dooyeweerd*, 144, 146.

Dooyeweerd's thinking constitute "enkaptic interlacements"¹¹⁰—pervasive relationships in society aimed at mapping structural coherence among distinct institutions. In an enkaptic interlacement, the relation between two independent social institutions with different qualifying functions does not imply the absorption of internal structures. In other words, in an enkaptic interlacement, each institution preserves its own sphere sovereignty. An enkaptic interlacement also possesses what Chaplin calls a "functional subservience." Functional subservience is the respect for other institutions' sovereignty or qualifying functions.

Here, in my view, the meaning of a sovereign sphere is clarified. In the Dooyeweerdian vocabulary, each sphere has its own qualifying function, which is irreducible and distinct from others, and is irreducible to others but can be subservient to them in a certain sense, in enkaptic interlacements.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 67–70.