

I Look through My Window into Life

Kuyper's Notion of Sphere Sovereignty (1870–1880)

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The notion of sphere sovereignty as presented by Abraham Kuyper was not so much the cumulative result of his knowledge of the intellectual history of Calvinism, but to a large extent his own idea. Kuyper started using the term *sphere sovereignty* early in his career, at first in relation to the freedom of the church from the state, later on in a new, ontological sense. Kuyper referred to the Bible and to Calvin as the origin of his notion, but, basically, he found it by looking into life. The suggestion that he derived this notion from Althusius lacks any historical proof.

Introduction

When the origin of Abraham Kuyper's (1837–1920) notion of sphere sovereignty, in Dutch: *souvereiniteit in eigen kring*—literally: “sovereignty within its own circle”—is at stake; it is assumed that this is basically a Calvinistic idea. Sphere sovereignty¹ is generally known as “the concept that each sphere (or sector) of life has its own distinct responsibilities and authority or competence, and stands equal to other spheres of life.”² Gordon Spykman traces sphere sovereignty back to John Calvin's doctrine of the sovereignty of God over creation, and God's creational norms for human society.³ Every authority, not just magistrates, is accountable directly to God.⁴ James Skillen and Rockne McCarthy wrote that Calvin's thought focused on the teleological significance of creation, in which God's creatures have specific purposes and responsibilities. Flowing from Calvin's doctrine of creation, they say, is the possibility of differentiation and integration in human society. In the thought of Calvin, God's creational

norms facilitate order and differentiation.⁵ And the Australian historian Simon Kennedy states that Johannes Althusius' pluralist political theory, formulated in the seventeenth century serves "as a platform for all subsequent Calvinist political thought."⁶

The idea of a Calvinistic continuum in history lies at the basis of what the authors I cited argue. From Calvin to Kuyper and then to the present there is an unbroken line through history that links the ideas of present-day Calvinists to those of Calvin. This is also the way Kuyper presented himself as a Calvinist. He thought of a more or less organic development, and wrote that he did not nothing else but draw the conclusions Calvin had not yet drawn when he wrote his texts three centuries before.

These authors all imply there is a clear connecting link between the thought of Calvin, Althusius, and the like on the one hand, and Kuyper's notion of sphere sovereignty on the other. But is there really such a link, and if so, what does that link look like? My thesis in this article is that, as far as historical evidence informs us, the notion of sphere sovereignty as presented by Abraham Kuyper was not so much the cumulative result of his knowledge of the intellectual history of Calvinism, but to a large extent his own idea. In order to make my point I will do two things: I take a closer look at the micro-history of Kuyper's introduction of this notion, and I will discuss some suggested origins of Kuyper's notion of sphere sovereignty.

Location and Context

When did Kuyper introduce his notion of sphere sovereignty, or, in Dutch, the notion of *souvereiniteit in eigen kring*? This question is not difficult to answer. The first time he used this phrase was on September 9, 1870, in *De Heraut*,⁷ and the expanded presentation of this notion was his address at the opening of the Vrije Universiteit, delivered on October 20, 1880, in the choir⁸ of the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam. So it was a notion he formulated early in his career, earlier than other famous notions, like special and common grace, institution and organism, or worldview. In 1880 he had been using the phrase *souvereiniteit in eigen kring* on and off for ten years.

In what context did he use this phrase? The first use was in the context of the church. This will not be a surprise, for until 1874 Kuyper was active as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, and his first interest was the church, and its position in Dutch society. In his *Confidentie*, published in 1873, he wrote that the question of the church was to him the most important issue to be addressed. This question had to do with the teachings and polity of the church—Calvin

had inspired him to strive after a pure and well-organized church—and with the position of the church in society. In his opinion the church had to be free from the state, and his employment of the notion of sphere sovereignty had to do with this last aspect.

In Kuyper's opinion a legal mistake had been made when, in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, founded in 1813, the church had been subjected to the state. This was new. It is true that the state in fact had controlled the church in the days of the Dutch Republic. But in Kuyper's opinion, based on his historical research and formulated in 1869,⁹ the Dutch Republic was legally a free state with a free church. In that situation of freedom, the Reformed (Calvinist) church had delegated her right of authority to a government that was Calvinist in nature. This right was attributed to the state by the church, not handed over to the state, let alone that the church had subjected herself to the state. In the nineteenth century the situation had changed in a fundamental way. The Dutch Republic had disappeared and the Kingdom of the Netherlands had taken its place. This new state did not have a confessional preference. In this new situation, according to Kuyper, the once delegated sovereignty of the church had returned to her.¹⁰ From then on, Kuyper wrote on August 26, 1870, the "sovereign right" the Reformed church possesses "within its own circle," would rest in her and not anywhere else¹¹—here Kuyper used the combination of sovereignty and circle for the first time. However, this change had not happened. To the contrary, the church had been subordinated to the state after 1813 and had been regulated by the state in such a way that the "republic" of the Reformed church—with free local churches—had been turned into a "despotic empire"—with the synod as a central governing body.¹² There was no freedom anymore, for without "sovereignty within its own circle"—Kuyper used the words without inverted commas, so not as an expression—freedom cannot exist, as he put it in a rather technical legal debate about the church and state sovereignty on September 9, 1870.¹³ This is the first time he formulated the phrase in full, in the context of an argument in favor of the freedom of the local church. It is still a loose combination of words, alternated by phrases like the "free organization of life within its own bosom."¹⁴

What Kuyper did in the early 1870s was defend religious freedom, that is, the sovereignty of the church, over against the state. Kuyper's plea for the liberation of the church might be seen as a personal preference, and the subjection of the church to the state as a mere incident. But that was not the case, Kuyper argued. This subjection was endemic to the dominant political theory of liberalism and was a violation of the freedom the church possessed.

The church was the first sphere or *kring* that suffered from usurpation by the state, but if no one objected, other spheres would fall in the hands of the state as well, like the primary school. So sphere sovereignty was used to defend the freedom of the church, but from his first use of this phrasing, Kuyper did not mean to restrict it to the church only or apply it just to the church.

Liberalism and Roman Catholicism

What was at stake according to Kuyper was a more general issue: the absence in liberalism of a limitation of the sovereignty of institutions *vis à vis* the personal conscience, a weakness he detected in both Liberalism and Roman Catholicism.¹⁵ This had to do with the fact that sovereignty was either based in God and delegated to church and state, as was the common assumption in Roman Catholic Europe before 1789, or sovereignty originated in the people and was embodied by the state, as the liberalism of the French Revolution claimed.

As such, this analysis was not an exclusively Calvinist position. This is what other antirevolutionary thinkers argued as well in the aftermath of the French revolution. What, then, was special of Kuyper's antirevolutionary action? Over against this violation of the notion of sovereignty, Kuyper said, a protest was not enough. This violation was not an incident, but the expression of a system of thought: "To maintain 'human rights' in theory, the natural right of individuals has to be violated."¹⁶ A more encompassing and positive answer was needed. He found this answer in the first place in the history of the Netherlands, that had vindicated the freedom of conscience over against the Roman Catholic Church and the Habsburg Empire. Dutchmen like Coornhert maintained in the sixteenth century over against the Catholics that "a coercion aiming at forcing someone to do what his conscience denies, is immoral, not wanted by God, and not granted but refused to a government."¹⁷ At the root of sphere sovereignty lies a natural right: the freedom of conscience.

Calvinism

At first, Calvinism was not expressly mentioned by Kuyper as the safeguard of this freedom. When he started his daily newspaper *De Standaard* in April 1872, he mentioned Calvinism the first two years mainly in polemics with Roman Catholic newspapers, who feared Kuyper's Calvinism as a harbinger of tyranny. Starting with his lecture "Calvinism the Origin and Safeguard of our Constitutional Liberties," published in June 1874, Calvinism became more

of a positive argument in his defense of freedom, not just for the church, but for society as a whole:

[W]e Calvinists in Holland favor liberty, and oppose all violence against orderly processes of nature.... [W]e ask equal rights for all, of whatever class or faith. Freedom of conscience, and of the press, of social union and of thought, we will defend with all our might. We want the liberation of the church by an honest and absolute separation from the state, its finances included; liberation from the school, not to restore it to the care of the church, but under state regulation to restore it to the parents, because the impersonal state cannot be a teacher of our youth.¹⁸

In this lecture, he used the expression “sovereignty within its own circle” three times and asked himself how this liberation was related to Calvinism:

[I]n answer to this question, even though apparently most contradictory, the fundamental doctrine of the Calvinists is cited: even the absolute sovereignty of God. For, from this confession, it follows that all authority and power in the earth is not inherent, but imposed; so that by nature no claim to authority can be entered either by prince or people.... Authority of one creature over another arises, first of all, from the fact that God confers it, not to abandon it himself, but to allow it to be used for his honor. He is sovereign, and he confers his authority upon whom he wills.¹⁹

From now on Calvinism and sphere sovereignty were linked in Kuyper’s works, but in this lecture sphere sovereignty was not elaborated on. The phrase has been attributed to Kuyper all over the world, but the phrase was according to him not original and he did not claim its authorship. The phrase was not very important to Kuyper either, for he did not use it very often before or after 1880 and certainly did not elaborate on or expand its meaning. In a debate in *De Standaard* with the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* in 1898 on sovereignty, he wrote that his views on sphere sovereignty had not changed much and therefore replied by giving lengthy quotes from his 1874 lecture.²⁰ We have to disappoint the philosophers and political theorists, for Kuyper never developed the notion *souvereiniteit in eigen kring* into a theory. It was Herman Dooyeweerd who did this, not Kuyper.

What Kuyper did do in the lecture was position himself in the Calvinist political tradition. The central focus was now on the state and society (constitutional liberties), not predominantly on the church. In his opinion Calvin had not given a political theory. The Calvinist political tradition had been developed over time. But two main principles in Calvin’s work have been fundamental for this

tradition. One is the independence of the church from the state, an important theme for Kuyper in the early 1870s. And the other, derived from this freedom of the church, is a distribution of state sovereignty: “*magistratus inferiores* have received a part of the state sovereignty of God, as well as the king,” wrote Kuyper. “They and he together are responsible to the King of kings that authority be for the good of the people. The king’s shortcomings in the discharge of duty do not release them from their oaths. If the king watch not, they must watch, though the king himself be the oppressor.”²¹ On this topic Kuyper read Calvin; he read Beza; he read French Huguenot political authors such as Francois Hotman, and he read Hubert Languet’s *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos*.²² He read Edmund Burke; he read Alexis de Tocqueville; and many others. He then chose as the first characteristic of a Calvinist political theory God’s sovereignty, distributed by him among various magistrates. This variety prevented tyranny to develop and the limitation of sovereignty helped protecting the liberties of the citizens.

Kuyper elaborated on the relation of sovereignty and liberty in such a way that he gave sphere sovereignty a distinct character. Previous Calvinist political thinkers had defended this civic freedom and had developed a right of resistance against despotism, some had even defended tyrannicide, to Kuyper’s distress (he called it a “false vein of the Renaissance”²³). But Kuyper now made a different move. Not only did he defend what had been taken away from citizens, he also argued that this freedom was not only historically, but also ontologically, grounded. Sphere sovereignty was not just about politics, it was about all of life. The notion that sovereignty was not the exclusive property of the state had been acknowledged by others, but now Kuyper gave reasons for this. On October 8, 1875, for example, he wrote in *De Standaard* about “sovereignty within its own circle” (the first time he used inverted commas) in relation to parliamentary representation: Kuyper showed understanding for the Jewish community, who wanted a Jew as representative in the Dutch Parliament, but a circle does not have specific political rights compared to other circles, and the axiom is that members of Parliament represent the people, not groups. Three months later he elaborated in a series on constitutionalism on the difference between state and society in order to explain that the antirevolutionary principle was not a threat to but a safeguard of constitutional liberties. If only the state were sovereign, no constitution would be needed. But there is a state and there is a society. In this society there are God-given, independent spheres granted with sovereignty, as Groen van Prinsterer and his antirevolutionary followers had said, according to Kuyper, and because of these plural sovereignties a constitution is needed to settle the relation between state and society.

An accurate formulating lawyer like Groen rarely used the word “sovereignty” for nongovernmental entities—he would rather use words like “autonomy” or “independence”²⁴—but it is a fact that Kuyper in 1880 gave him the credit for formulating the term *sphere sovereignty*.²⁵ According to Johan van der Vyver the phrase *souvereiniteit in eigen kring* had first been used by Groen in his booklet of 1862 to commemorate Stahl. But in the clause Van der Vyver refers to, both the specific Kuyperian word *kring* and the general character of this *kring* are missing in this reference.²⁶ Unlike Johan van de Vyver’s statement, the exact use of the phrase has not been found in Groen’s works yet.

The same goes for Franz von Baader (1765–1841). Glenn Friesen claims the idea of sphere sovereignty largely comes from Von Baader. Ideas regarding the nature and relation of state, church, and society were around in the Netherlands in the second half of the nineteenth century, including Von Baader’s. But compared to Calvin or even Groen and his followers, Kuyper hardly ever refers to Von Baader (and if so, almost always with a *caveat*), not in his pamphlets and books and not in *De Standaard* or *De Heraut*, and not at all in relation to the development of his notion of sphere sovereignty. There are, according to Friesen, philosophical similarities between Von Baader and Kuyper, but historical evidence for Von Baader’s influence on Kuyper is mostly absent.²⁷

So there were sovereignties, different and independent from the state. These sovereign circles are not accidental or temporary: “The various organs [circles] that express life in society are no human invention, but are grounded in the essence of things and therefore created by God.”²⁸ His conclusion was that the sovereignty of the different circles within society was ordained by God, and that therefore anti-revolutionaries have to defend constitutionalism (that is, the settling of the right of sphere sovereignty over against the state).²⁹

In his 1876 series on constitutionalism he had already summed up a variety of circles, but he did this more extensively in an article in *De Standaard* of June 17, 1878. There he stated that God “called into being by his creative powers” various entities, to which he apportioned power. The first entity was the human person, but there were more:

There is a distinctive life of science; a distinctive life of art; a distinctive life of the church; a distinctive life of the family; a distinctive life of town or village; a distinctive life of agriculture; a distinctive life of industry; a distinctive life of commerce; a distinctive life of works of mercy; and the list goes on.

Now then, next to and alongside all these entities and ever so many other organizations stands the institution of the state.

Not above them, but alongside them. For each of these organizations possesses *sphere-sovereignty*, that is to say, derives the power at its disposal, not as a grant from the state but as a direct gift from God.³⁰

The order of creation is such that authority is not allocated in the state authorities but distributed between different entities. Kuyper's sociological reflection therefore did not start with the unity of the state, as if this were the prominent entity in each society, but with the particular person and his sphere of sovereignty.

In Kuyper's address at the opening of the Vrije Universiteit in October 1880 "Sovereignty within Its Own Circle," the topical discussion about the freedom of the Dutch Reformed Church within the Kingdom of the Netherlands or about the state and the freedom of conscience was fully left behind. What was at stake in this world was God's sovereignty, his kingship. (Of the threefold office of Jesus Christ as king, prophet, and priest, Kuyper had a strong preference for the kingship and would later on describe the Christian life as *Pro Rege*.) Sphere sovereignty had cosmic proportions: "Sphere sovereignty defending itself against State sovereignty: that is the course of world history... It existed of old. It lay in the order of creation, in the structure of human life. It was there before State sovereignty arose."³¹ Kuyper presented sphere sovereignty and state sovereignty as creeds or life convictions, for "the gulf that separates them lies not in a different arrangement of ideas but in a *recognition* or *denial* of the *facts of life*."³² To those who deny God's revelation, sovereignty is "*insofar as practical*, undivided, and also penetrating *all spheres*."³³ To those who believe God's revelation, all sovereignty is with Christ, "claiming power over all nations and, *in* all nations, over conscience and faith." He divided life into distinctive spheres and sovereignties. "Our human life ... is neither simple nor uniform but constitutes an infinitely complex organism ... there are in life as many spheres as there are constellations in the sky."³⁴

One aspect in Kuyper's opening address may be confusing to us.³⁵ He dealt with two issues at the same time. He dealt with the ontological diversity of the spheres in a frame of a plurality of creeds—from the early 1890s on he described his own creed as the Calvinistic worldview. To many contemporaries it was unclear how Kuyper on the one hand promoted his distinct antirevolutionary political program and on the other hand did not strive after a Calvinistic state like Calvin's Geneva. Did sphere sovereignty—borrowing James Bratt's distinction—mean ontological differentiation (sovereignty within *its* circle) only, or was it related to epistemological differentiation as (sovereignty within *one's* circle)?³⁶ Yes, they were related, he explained in his opening address: Your creed determines your opinion on sphere sovereignty—whether it is an anomaly or a creational structure. Kuyper had to explain that he was not after a Calvinistic utopia. He saw the Netherlands as a country with 40 percent Catholics, with Modernists, Positivists, Atheists, and in politics Liberals, Conservatives, Anti-

revolutionaries, Ultramontanists, and Radicals, and with a history with positive and negative aftereffects. These facts should not be neglected but acknowledged in an antirevolutionary program that had to fit the present situation. Kuyper stressed two things: (1) that a society is dependent on its Creator for its existence, meaning, and flourishing, and (2) that a Christian political program aims at a *modus vivendi* for all parties and creeds.³⁷

John Calvin

At this point Kuyper's ideas had become different from those of others in his days, Modernists and Theocrats, Conservatives and Liberals alike, even from close allies such as Groen van Prinsterer. The ontological character of diversity and of a religiously plural society was at odds with Groen's vision of state sovereignty, and with his promotion of a Dutch state with a public Protestant character, expressed in a public Reformed church and a public Christian school. To Kuyper, this public unity had been outdated since different creeds claimed legitimacy in the public domain.³⁸

Now the question arises: Where did Kuyper pick up his ontological notion of sphere sovereignty? He did not get it from Calvin, Beza, Hotman, or Languet, and, as said, not from Groen or another contemporary author either.

The question about the origin of his notion of sphere sovereignty is as old as his opening address. On the front page of *Algemeen Handelsblad* of October 31, 1880—ten days after Kuyper had delivered his opening address—Allard Pierson (1831–1896) blamed Kuyper in a lengthy article for opening a Christian university without presenting a Christian foundation, that is to say, “that Dr. Kuyper in this opening address, in this first manifesto of the Vrije Universiteit, did not make any deliberate attempt in the least to deduce the main thesis: sphere sovereignty, only from the from Bible or [Calvin's] Institutes; but to the contrary founded this thesis, I truly almost said: as a common rationalist, through dialectics.”³⁹ Pierson was a well-respected man in Dutch cultural circles, and he and Kuyper knew each other personally. He was professor of art history and aesthetics at the University of Amsterdam, but had previously been minister in the Reformed Church like Kuyper. In 1865 he had resigned because he could not reconcile being a minister with not believing in divine revelation.

In a series of *Heraut* articles in December 1880 and January 1881 Kuyper rejected Pierson's objection. Though he had not quoted texts from the Bible in his address, he certainly had referred to biblical notions such as the Trinity, Christ's kingship, and the cross, he wrote. He maintained that the whole notion of sphere sovereignty was based exclusively on God's Word. This did not mean he was

a biblicist who grounded his opinion on a specific Bible quotation, but that he had followed this general teaching of the Bible: “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made” (Rom. 1:20), and focused on this “clearly seen”: “to know if life is uniform or distinct, I don’t read Proverbs, but I look through my window into life.”⁴⁰ In passing he defended the use of dialectics as a means that had always been accepted within the Reformed theological tradition.

Kuyper was right, to a certain extent. In his opening address he had referred to the Bible, and also to Calvin. He explained to Pierson and his readers how he derived his notion of sphere sovereignty from Calvin’s *Institutes*. His argument was that if Calvin determined a domain where the sovereignty of the magistrate was void or conditional, this implied that he acknowledged other sovereignties in distinct circles, and therefore denied absolute sovereignty. This restriction led in Calvin’s own works “to the obligation to withstand [the absolute sovereignty of] the magistrate.”⁴¹ Kuyper gave lengthy quotes from Calvin’s *Institutes* to substantiate his argument, like these: “If they [the rulers] command anything against Him let us not pay the least regard to it.”⁴² And if the lower magistrates—Calvin gave as examples the *ephoroi* in Greece and the Senate in Rome, and Kuyper added the States-General (the Dutch Parliament)—do not “check the undue license of kings, that if they connive at kings when they tyrannise and insult over the humbler of the people ... they fraudulently betray the liberty of the people, while knowing that, by the ordinance of God, they are its appointed guardians.”⁴³ He concluded that Calvin did not know absolute sovereignty, and strongly respected circles with a sovereignty of their own; not only the church, but also in society.⁴⁴

The disadvantage of this defense was that Kuyper referred to society, that is, to the general character of sphere sovereignty, but that Calvin wrote about sovereignty in the political sphere. Kuyper stretched Calvin’s words as far as possible, but the utmost he could squeeze out of them was that Calvin had referred to something like sphere sovereignty by implication. In this way he tried to avert Pierson’s specific criticism, that sphere sovereignty was his own idea and not a biblical notion or an idea of Calvin, and that he had presented his very own idea as Christian or Calvinistic.

To Kuyper this stretching was not a problem. When he dealt with Calvinism and Calvin’s ideas, he did this deductively. He had an idea of what Calvinism was ideally—with a free church, freedom of conscience, sphere sovereignty—and detected its basic principles in Calvin’s works. When the objection was made that “I don’t read anywhere Calvin was in favor of a free church; Calvin never mentions sphere sovereignty; etc.,” then Kuyper argued that these notions are

in Calvin's works, but they were not developed in his days. The development happened over time, and he was at the point in history where Calvinism developed more fully.⁴⁵

So Kuyper found references to restricted political sovereignty in Calvin's works that were building blocks for his ontological notion of sphere sovereignty, but he was unable to clarify where his notion originated, and that was what Pierson asked for.

Johannes Althusius

Instead of attributing the notion of sphere sovereignty to Calvin, some have suggested that Kuyper argued along the same line as Johannes Althusius (Althaus) (1557–1638), Calvinist professor of Law at the Academy in Herborn (Nassau), had done in his *Politica* of 1603, a work that went through several editions in the seventeenth century, printed in Herborn, Arnhem, and Groningen.⁴⁶ Althusius adopted the views of authors developed during the civil wars in France in the sixteenth century. From the principle of the sovereignty of the people they derived a right of resistance to rulers who violated their contract with the people—they were called *monarchomachi*. This right was applied in specific circumstances and with concrete aims. Althusius, according to Otto von Gierke, who rediscovered his work in the late nineteenth century, did something new by turning this right into a theory, both broader and more rigorous than what the French (Huguenots) had done. But above all, “he expounded the absolute inalienability of the sovereign rights of the people.”⁴⁷ Several contemporaries of Althusius had condemned his position, and he was seen by some as the “seditious architect of disorder.”⁴⁸

When Kuyper in the 1870s got interested in Calvinism and political theory, he might have read Althusius, but he did not. He never in his life mentioned Althusius in *De Standaard* or *De Heraut*. When he assembled his voluminous collection of political writings from the 1870s in *Our Program*, published in 1879, there was not a single reference to Althusius in it. Neither did Kuyper refer to Althusius in his opening address at the Vrije Universiteit in 1880 on sphere sovereignty. In Kuyper's extensive correspondence with political theorists like Groen van Prinsterer or Alexander de Savornin Lohman, Althusius is absent. Groen relied on the German political thinker F. J. Stahl, but this German political thinker too did not mention Althusius in his *Geschiede der Rechtsphilosophie* (3rd edition 1856). Kuyper biographer James Bratt was puzzled by the fact that Kuyper ignored Althusius, and Jonathan Chaplin has suggested that Kuyper did not want to make use of Althusius because he had been instrumentalized to sup-

port the modern German state.⁴⁹ But no Dutch political theorist ever mentioned Althusius in the 1870s or 1880s. Althusius's name was just not around at the time Kuyper developed his ideas on sphere sovereignty, and therefore Kuyper did not ascribe this opinion to him.

Althusius had been known by Voetius and Hugo Grotius, but after the middle of the eighteenth century his work had sunk into oblivion.⁵⁰ He was rediscovered in the last quarter of the nineteenth century by the German historian and legal scholar Otto von Gierke (1841–1921), who published on him in 1879.⁵¹ Von Gierke described Althusius as well-nigh forgotten, “eines fast verschollenen Deutschen Gelehrten.”⁵² He saw clear parallels between Althusius's ideas and Jean Jacques Rousseau's ideas of a social contract, and according to him it had direct influence on the legal foundation of the German empire.

In the 1880s Von Gierke's book was not available in any Dutch university library, and today the only 1879 edition of this book in the Netherlands is in the library of the Vrije Universiteit—obtained in 1970.⁵³ To my knowledge, the first in the Netherlands who referred to Von Gierke's book on Althusius is Damme Fabius, professor of Law at the Vrije Universiteit. He did this in 1896 in a lecture at the Vrije Universiteit.⁵⁴ Fabius referred to Von Gierke several times later on, because of the German's appreciation of Calvinism and religious freedom.⁵⁵ Althusius' name became better known in the Netherlands only in the twentieth century. In *Antirevolutionaire staatkunde*, Kuyper's revised exposition on the antirevolutionary political program of 1916, he referred to the second edition of Van Gierke's book (1902). In 1916 Kuyper preferred Languet over Althusius because of the latter's lack of religious motives. Kuyper sidelined Althusius in the Calvinist political tradition.⁵⁶ So it is clear that Althusius did not have influence on Kuyper's development of his notion of sphere sovereignty.

Althusius was absent from Kuyper's orbit, but without realizing Kuyper came close to him when in his discussion with Pierson he referred to the Calvinist Johann Heinrich Alsted (1588–1638). Alsted had been educated at Herborn Academy, taught Philosophy (and later on Theology) at this institution from 1608 until 1629, and was Nassau's delegate at the Synod of Dordt. Althusius had been professor at Herborn Academy before 1603, so his name and work may have been familiar to him. Alsted is called “the true parent of all the Encyclopedias” for his *Encyclopaedia* (1630). This is one of the encyclopedias that inspired Kuyper to write his own in the early 1890s.⁵⁷

Kuyper referred to Alsted as one of the Calvinist theologians and political thinkers who promoted limited state sovereignty. After having listed the usual names—he pointed Pierson to the references in his 1874 pamphlet *Het calvinisme oorsprong en waarborg onzer constitutioneele vrijheden*—he, for the first

time, mentioned Alsted's view on sovereignty. Kuyper's quote from Alsted's *Cursus philosophici encyclopaedia* (1620) is remarkably close to the viewpoints Althusius had developed in his *Politica*. The *ephori* (translated by Kuyper as the States-General) had been added to the government to limit royal power. The States-General represents the whole community and as such they have the right to appoint and restrain the king. Their power is even of a higher order than those of kings, in as far as they can install and depose kings. This authority is regulated by king and States-General in a constitution.⁵⁸ But again, like in the case of Calvin, the reference to Alsted regards limited state sovereignty, and not the ontological notion of sphere sovereignty.

Conclusion

The development of Kuyper's notion of sphere sovereignty was like this: The notion was used from September 1870 on to defend the freedom of the church on historical grounds, but from the start Kuyper did not mean to apply it to the church only. From 1873 on, Calvinism was linked to his defense of freedom for society as a whole. The central focus was now on state and society (constitutional liberties), not on the church. From 1876 on, freedom was not only historically but also ontologically grounded. Sphere sovereignty was not just about the church or the state and constitutionalism, it was about life in general. There were all kinds of sovereignties, different and independent from the state. In 1878 Kuyper's sociological reflection therefore no longer started with issues about church and state, but with the particular person and his sphere sovereignty. In 1880 the topical discussion about the freedom of the Dutch Reformed Church within the Kingdom of the Netherlands or about the state and the freedom of conscience was fully left behind. Sovereignty now was "the authority that has the right, the duty and the power to break and avenge all resistance to its will ... the original, absolute sovereignty cannot reside in any creature, but *must* coincide with God's majesty."⁵⁹ All absolute sovereignty on earth is therefore denied and challenged by God, "by dividing life into *separate* spheres, each with its own sovereignty ... within its bounds."⁶⁰

I stick to my thesis that Abraham Kuyper's ontological notion of sphere sovereignty was not so much the cumulative result of his knowledge of the intellectual history, mainly that of Calvinism, but to a large extent his own invention—he did this by looking out of his window. As such, this conclusion substantiates the impression of philosopher J. D. Dengerink that Kuyper developed his notion of sphere sovereignty intuitively.⁶¹

Notes

1. The term *Sphere sovereignty* is a translation of the Dutch “soevereiniteit in eigen kring” and was introduced in the 1950s, when the term was also translated literally as “sovereignty within its own sphere,” only to become current after the turn of the century. The Dutch term has been derived from A. Kuyper, *Sovereiniteit in eigen kring. Rede ter inwijding van de Vrije Universiteit, den 20sten October 1880 gehouden, in het koor der Nieuwe Kerk te Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: J. H. Kruyt, 1880). Sphere sovereignty was also renamed by the CDA in more general terms as differentiated responsibility. *CDA rapport Gereede twijfel*, 1974, in *Gespreide verantwoordelijkheid*, 1978. H. E. S. Woldring, *De christen-democratie. Een kritisch onderzoek naar haar politieke filosofie* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1996), 192–95, speaks of competences and responsibilities.
2. S.v. “Sphere Sovereignty,” *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sphere_sovereignty, accessed October 10, 2020.
3. Gordon J. Spykman, “Sphere Sovereignty in Calvin and the Calvinist Tradition,” in *Exploring the Legacy of John Calvin: Essays in Honour of John Bratt*, ed. David E. Holwerda (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House 1976), 165.
4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1491 (see 4.10.6); Ralph C. Hancock, *Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2011), 81; James W. Skillen and Rockne M. McCarthy, eds., *Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society*, 21.
5. Skillen and McCarthy, *Political Order*, 22, 24. For example, Calvin applies this principle to the role of the civil magistrate with regards to the church and society. See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1488 (4.10.3).
6. Simon P. Kennedy, “Abraham Kuyper and His Political Thought: Calvinist and Pluralist,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 72, no. 2 (2013): 79.
7. Roger Henderson, “The Development of the Principle of Distributed Authority, or Sphere Sovereignty,” *Philosophia Reformata* 82 (2017): 85, is mistaken in stating that Kuyper’s first use of the term was in A. Kuyper, *Het calvinisme oorsprong en waarborg onzer constitutioneele vrijheden. Een Nederlandsche gedachte* (Amsterdam: B. van der Land, 1874), 6, 46–47; J. Glenn Friesen, “New Research on Groen van Prinsterer and the Idea of Sphere Sovereignty,” *Philosophia Reformata* 84 (2019): 6, is mistaken in stating that “Kuyper’s references to sovereignty in its own sphere are all after 1871.” Friesen claims J. I. Doedes in 1853 was the first who used the term *sovereiniteit in eigen kring* (Friesen uses this inexact translation: “sovereignty in its own sphere”), but in the quotes he gives either *sovereiniteit* or *kring* is missing (8–9). Friesen could not find Doedes’ quote of *sovereiniteit in*

eigen sfeer. It is from Groen van Prinsterer, *De Nederlander*, January 26, 1852. The notion of independent spheres can be found in many publications from the mid-nineteenth century, but the exact phrase *souvereiniteit in eigen kring* is Kuyper's.

8. Bratt translates this as “pulpit.”
9. A. Kuyper, “De eerste kerkvergaderingen of de vestiging onzer Hervormde Kerk, en de strijd om haar zelfstandig bestaan,” in B. ter Haar and W. Moll, *Geschiedenis der christelijke kerk in Nederland in tafereelen* (Amsterdam: G. Portielje & Zoon, 1869), 80: “Volkomen autonomie tegenover het burgerlijke bestuur en krachtige eenheid naar binnen in belijdenis, gebruiken en eeredienst, of wil men—de vrije kerk in den vrijen staat; ziedaar het duidelijk uitgesproken manifest dier kloeke mannen, die van stonde aan met vaste hand orde wilden scheppen in den ontredederden toestand.”
10. *De Heraut*, August 26, 1870: “Het bijkomstig gezag der souvereiniteit verviel, nu de staat zich terugtrok uit den kring, waarin de middellijke oorsprong van dat bijkomstig gezag moet gezocht worden.”
11. *De Heraut*, August 26, 1870: In the Kingdom of the Netherlands the state had no preference for the Reformed church anymore, but “Daarmee valt het feit niet weg, dat het souvereine recht, dat de Hervormde Kerk in eigen kring toekomt, voortaan alleen in haar zelve kon rusten.”
12. See Fred van Lieburg and Joke Roelevink, eds., *Ramp of redding? 200 jaar Algemeen Reglement voor het Bestuur der Hervormde Kerk in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden (1816–2016)* (Utrecht, Boekencentrum: 2018).
13. Cf. A. Kuyper, *Vrijmaking der kerk* (Amsterdam, H. de Hoogh, 1869), 12: “Zonder naar het recht der kerk te vragen, zonder te letten op de natuur van haar eigenaardig leven, zonder kennis van hare geschiedenis, wierp de staat zich als voogd over onze gereformeerde gemeenten op.”
14. *De Heraut*, February 3, 1871: “vrije inrichting van het leven in eigen boezem.”
15. For his critique of Roman Catholicism see *De Heraut*, February 9, 1879:

Gelijk thans het staatsabsolutisme naar almogendheid streeft; elke grens uitwisch; en zich op élk gebied en in élken kring des levens souverein waant; zoo ook wilde het Romes kerkabsolutisme destijds.

Op elk terrein en elk gebied, in elke sfeer en in elken kring van mensche-lijk aanzijn oordeelde Rome, dat niet slechts de door haar beleden waarheid; maar in het gevolg van die waarheid ook haar kerkelijke jurisdictie; en ter ondersteuning van die jurisdictie ook de sterke arm van de overheid; moest doordringen.

Het besef van een “souvereiniteit in eigen kring” was er totaal uit.

De vader was geen hoofd meer bij de gratie Gods in zijn eigen huis; en zoo ook de mensch geen meester meer bij de gratie Gods op het terrein van zijn eigen consciëntie.

Noch de persoonlijke overtuiging, noch de geheime twijfel, noch de drang der consciëntie, noch het gebed in de binnenkamer, noch de opvoeding der kinderen, bood aan Romes macht een grens; en, zonder grenzen, onbepaald en onbelemmerd, wilde ze heerschen overal, altijd en bij allen; en eischte voor die heerschappij den steun ook van het magistrale zwaard.

16. A. Kuyper, *'Het beroep op het volksgeweten.'* Rede ter opening van de Algemeene Vergadering der 'Vereeniging voor Christelijk Nationaal Schoolonderwijs', gehouden te Utrecht, den 18den Mei 1869 (Amsterdam: B.H. Blankenberg Jr., 1869), 26:

Men onthoudt ons onze vrijheid, omdat de moderne staatsidé te weinig wortel in het volksleven heeft, om zonder bescherming te kunnen leven. Men moet uit zucht naar zelfbehoud den „vrijverklaarden” burger boeien. Men moet om in theorie de „rechten van den mensch” te kunnen handhaven, geweld plegen aan het natuurlijk recht der individuen. Men moet om het „welzijn van den staat” te bevorderen, dwang uitoefenen op het nationale leven.

17. *De Heraut*, February 9, 1879: "... dat zulk een dwang, die dwingen wilde om te doen wat de consciëntie weêrsprak, onzedelijk, door God niet gewild, en der overheid niet geboden maar ontzegd is."

18. A. Kuyper, "Calvinism: The Origin and Safeguard of our Constitutional Liberties," *The Bibliotheca Sacra* 52, no. 208 (October 1895): 674. Friesen, "New Research," 4, mistakenly wrote that Kuyper's lecture is about "when we are able to overthrow a tyrannical government." Kuyper was a democrat who defended the freedom of the people. He never had the intention to overthrow a government.

19. Kuyper, "Calvinism: The Origin," 661; Kuyper, *Het calvinisme oorsprong*, 51–52:

in welk Calvinistisch geloofsbeginsel de wortel dezer vrijheden schuilt? ... hun belijdenis van de volstreckte souvereiniteit Gods. Uit die belijdenis toch vloeit voort, dat alle gezag en macht op aarde niet inhaerent, maar opgelegd is, zoodat er van nature noch bij den vorst noch bij het volk van souvereiniteit sprake kan zijn.... Gezag van het ééne schepsel over het andere ontstaat eerst, doordien God dit verleent, niet om het af te staan, maar om het te laten gebruiken tot zijn eer. Hij is dus vrijmachtig en geeft dat gezag aan wien Hij wil.

For the expression "sovereignty within its own circle," see Kuyper, *Het calvinisme oorsprong*, 6, 46–47; and Kuyper, "Calvinism: The Origin," 655, 657.

20. *De Standaard*, March 7, 1898.

21. Kuyper, "Calvinism: The Origin," 655, cf. 659: "If, however, Calvin is free to choose, he prefers a republic. He read too closely the annals of the sins of royal

autocrats, not to dislike despotism. In an authority entrusted to many there is less temptation to tyranny.”

22. He refers to Hotman and especially Languet in Kuyper, *Het calvinisme oorsprong*, 44–45.
23. Kuyper, “Calvinism: The Origin,” 654.
24. See Groen van Prinsterer, *Ongeloof en revolutie. Eene reeks van historische voorlezingen* (Leiden: S. and J. Luchtmans 1847), 48, 72; idem, in *Handelingen Tweede Kamer 1849–1850*, June 24, 1850, 20: “Ik heb gezegd: zelfstandigheid is onafhankelijkheid in eigen kring.... juist dit is mijn wensch, een wensch, die van de eigenaardigheid der school, waartoe ik behoer, het gevolg is, dat er een middel moge gevonden worden om weder een welingerigt verband te hebben der zelfstandigheid van de gewesten nut hunne ondergeschiktheid aan den Staat.”
25. Kuyper, *Souvereiniteit in eigen kring*, 16: “... en schreef ten leste Groen van Prinsterer het staatsrechtelijk credo, door zijn sprekende formule van “sovereiniteit in eigen kring”.” More loosely formulated he said the same in *De Standaard*, January 22, 1876 (when Groen was still alive): “... door Groen en zijn volgelingen van echten bloede steeds met nadruk op het feit geweest, dat er ... op elk terrein van het maatschappelijk leven, een soevereiniteit in eigen kring bestaat, die door den staat gegund wordt, maar zonder tusschenkomst van den Staat onmiddellijk voortvloeit uit een beschikking Gods.”
26. Johan D. van der Vyver, “The Jurisprudential Legacy of Abraham Kuyper and Leo XIII,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 5, no. 1 (2002): 212. The quote Van der Vyver meant is G. Groen van Prinsterer, *Ter nagedachtenis van Stahl* (Amsterdam: Höveker, 1862), 45: “Weërkeurig heeft Stahl niet minder dan Vinet geijverd voor gewetensvrijheid, regt der persoonlijkheid, en soevereiniteit der kerk in haar eigen sfeer.”
27. J. Glenn Friesen, *Neo-Calvinism and Christian Theosophy: Franz von Baader, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Dooyeweerd* (Calgary: Aevum Books, 2015), 75–95.
28. *De Standaard*, January 22, 1876 (corrected on January 25, 1876): “De organen, waarin dit leven zich uit, zijn niet van menselijke vinding, maar in het wezen der dingen gegrond en dus van God geschapen.” Friesen, “New Research,” 9–10, also has questions about Groen’s use of the word sovereignty.
29. *De Standaard*, January 27, 1876: “Dat de constitutioneele quaestie geen andere is dan de vraag, of de levenskringen der natie, om met soevereiniteit in eigen kring te bestaan, vrucht zijn van Goddelijke beschikking of wel uitvloeisel van staatsbeleid; en dat, wijl we het eerste aannemen, strijd voor de constitutie voor elken antirevolutionair plicht is.”

30. A. Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2015), 70, originally published in *De Standaard*, June 17, 1878.
31. A. Kuyper, *Sphere Sovereignty*, in James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 469.
32. Kuyper, *Sphere Sovereignty*, 466.
33. Kuyper, *Sphere Sovereignty*, 466.
34. Kuyper, *Sphere Sovereignty*, 467.
35. Kuyper is not confusing here, as Friesen, “New Research,” 4, wrote, but Friesen is confused by Kuyper’s reasoning. The same goes for Friesen mixing up sphere sovereignty and constitutional delegation (point 4 on Friesen, “New Research,” 4). Friesen thinks Kuyper calls constitutional delegation sphere sovereignty, but to Kuyper sphere sovereignty is the idea behind constitutional delegation.
36. In Bratt’s introduction to Kuyper, *Sphere Sovereignty*, 461–62, he writes “our” instead of “one’s.”
37. *De Standaard*, February 24, 1879.
38. See George Harinck, “Groen van Prinsterer en Thomas Chalmers. “Precious ties of a common faith”,” in J. de Bruijn and G. Harinck, eds., *Groen van Prinsterer in Europese context* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2004), 43–54.
39. *Algemeen Handelsblad*, October 31, 1880: “dat dr. Kuyper in deze inwijdingsrede, in dit eerste manifest der Vrije Universiteit, geen enkele opzettelijke poging heeft gedaan om de hoofdstelling: souvereiniteit in eigen kring, uit bijbel of Institutie, allerm minst om haar alleen daaruit af te leiden; maar integendeel, ik zeide waarlijk bijna: als een gewoon rationalist, die stelling vindt alleen door dialectiek.”
40. *De Heraut*, December 19, 1880: “Om te weten dat er een zon, en maan is en starren zijn, sla ik geen bijbeltekst op, en zoo ook om te weten, of het leven eenvormig of geschakeerd is, lees ik niet in de Spreuken, maar zie ik door mijn venster het leven in.” Kuyper continued his argument with Pierson in the issues of December 26, 1880 and January 2, 1881. Henderson, “Development of the Principle,” 94, overstated Kuyper’s argument of observation by writing that Kuyper’s notion of sphere sovereignty was “not gained by reading books.” It was not gained by reading books only.
41. *De Heraut*, January 2, 1881.
42. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 5th ed., trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1845), 4.20.32.
43. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.31. Kuyper mistakenly referred to Par. 33.

44. *De Heraut*, January 2, 1881: In Calvin's rejection of absolute sovereignty "zou niet liggen souvereiniteit óók voor het sociale leven in eigen kring?" And that "... de hervormer van Genève extensief van geen absolute souvereiniteit afweet, en wel terdege kringen met eigen souvereiniteit eerbiedigt, tot zelfs op sociaal terrein."
45. In *De Heraut*, January 2, 1881, as to sphere sovereignty, Kuiper admitted "dat zeer zeker op menig punt dit groote beginsel door Calvyn nog niet consequent was doorgevoerd; doch dat niets afdoet aan het feit, dat hij het beginsel zelf gehuldigd heeft."
46. See Ray Pennings and James Brink, "Sphere Sovereignty 101," *Comment Magazine*, August 1, 2005: "In the late nineteenth century, Althusius's idea that the institutions of society have distinct realms of influence and authority was picked up by Abraham Kuiper, the Dutch prime minister at the time," and "the idea of sphere sovereignty, originating with Althusius and further developed by Kuiper in the nineteenth century." Kennedy, "Abraham Kuiper," 85, argues that in using the "rhetoric of his predecessors John Calvin and Johannes Althusius, Kuiper clearly places himself in the Calvinist stream of political theology.... [W]e can confidently assert that Abraham Kuiper's political thought can be placed within the theoretical stream of Calvinist pluralism." Craig Bartholomew, *Contours of the Kuiperian Tradition: A Systematic Introduction* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), chap. 5, adds Althusius to the thinkers that influenced Kuiper's notion of sphere sovereignty. See also the Dutch Wikipedia page on Althusius: "... het principe van de soevereiniteit in eigen kring van de negentiende-eeuwse Nederlandse gereformeerde staatsman Abraham Kuiper kan als een representatie van Althusius' gedachtegoed gezien worden," s.v. "Abraham Kuiper," *Wikipedia*, https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Kuiper, accessed March 25, 2020.
47. Otto von Gierke, *Johannes Althusius und die Entwicklung der naturrechtlichen Staatstheorie. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Rechtssystematik. Th. 1: Leben und Lehre des Althusius* (Breslau: W. Koebner, 1879), 4: "Und breiter und folgerichtiger als irgend einer seiner Vorgänger fundamentirte er seine Theorie, indem er vor Allem die absolute Unveräusserlichkeit der Majestätsrechte des Volkes und das Wesen des zu Grunde liegenden Socialkontraktes in Wendungen darlegte." ET: Otto von Gierke, *The Development of Political Theory* (London: Routledge, 2018).
48. Von Gierke, *Johannes Althusius*, 6–7: "den staatsgefährlichen Systematiker der Aufruhdoktrinen." ET: Von Gierke, *The Development of Political Theory*. In *De Standaard*, January 22, 1876, Kuiper implicitly rejected Althusius' opinion that sovereignty resides in the organized body of the commonwealth, that is, the people: "De regeering ... is soeverein ... Niet door een souvereiniteit, die haar het volk opdroeg, of uit de maatschappij haar toevloede, — hoe toch zou ooit uit eenige maatschappelijken levenskring een politieke macht kunnen vloeien, die er niet in

is, — maar met een hoogheid van gezag, die haar onmiddellijk uit de bron van alle gezag toekomt, d. i. bij de gratie Gods.”

49. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, 133–35.
50. Von Gierke, *Johannes Althusius*, 8.
51. Otto von Gierke, *Leben und Lehre des Althusius. Festschrift im Namen und Auftrage der juristischen Fakultät der Universität Breslau verfasst* (Breslau: W. Koebner, 1879); idem, *Johannes Althusius*.
52. Von Gierke, “Vorwort,” in idem, *Johannes Althusius*, VII.
53. The book belonged to the “Mr. H. Bos-bibliotheek,” that was bequeathed to the library of the Vrije Universiteit in 1970. The logo of this library is a portrait of Althusius. See J. Stellingwerff, *De mr. H. Bos-bibliotheek van de Vrije Universiteit* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1971).
54. D. P. D. Fabius, *Gereformeerde beginselen. Toespraak gehouden bij de heropening van de lessen der Vrije Universiteit, den 22sten september 1896* (Leiden: D. Donner, 1896), 7.
55. F.e. D. P. D. Fabius, *Staatsrecht en politiek* (Utrecht: G.J.A. Ruys, 1909), 298. Fabius used the 1880 edition of Von Gierke.
56. A. Kuyper, *Antirevolutionaire staatkunde I* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1916), 654.
57. See *De Heraut*, April 11, 1880.
58. Johann Heinrich Alsted, *Cursus philosophici encyclopaedia* (Herborn: G. Corvinus, 1620), 2577. Dutch translation by Kuyper, *De Heraut*, January 2, 1881:

De Ephoren of de Staten-Generaal zijn aan de overheid toegevoegd, om de koninklijke macht te beperken (ad ejus potestatem limitandam); want ze vertegenwoordigen het geheele volk en hebben als zoodanig het recht, om den Koning aan te stellen en te bedwingen (constituendi et coërcendi). Hun macht is zelfs van hooger orde dan die der vorsten, in zoovere ze den vorst in zijn bewind zetten of er uit verwijderen. (Denk b.v. aan krankzinnigheid.) Deze bevoegdheid wordt door Koning en Staten-Generaal in een Grondwet geregeld.
59. Kuyper, *Sphere Sovereignty*, in Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 466.
60. Kuyper, *Sphere Sovereignty*, in Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, 467.
61. J. D. Dengerink, *Critisch-historisch onderzoek naar de sociologische ontwikkeling van het beginsel der “sovereiniteit in eigen kring” in den 19e en 20e eeuw* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1948), 117, 161.