Journal of Markets & Morality
Volume 5, Number 1 (Spring 2002), 277–284

A Historian's Comment on the Use of Abraham Kuyper's Idea of Sphere Sovereignty

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As a theoretical thinker, Kuyper did not surpass his contemporaries. A Free University professor stated at the burial of Abraham Kuyper in November 1920, that it was understandable that Kuyper, unlike his Dutch co-theologian Herman Bavinck, never was elected a member of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences. He said: "For the official academic world Kuyper has been more an object of study than a subject.… He was never taken seriously as an academic."[1] How doubtful this rather critical judgment may seem to us, it does not stand alone. In the 1930s the Dutch Reformed philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd made it clear that, though Abraham Kuyper was crowned with the most extraordinary gifts, he certainly had some blind spots. And the Reformed theologian Klaas Schilder was right, too, when he observed in 1947 that Abraham Kuyper, the theologian, often had had to make place for Kuyper the tactical general.[2] In the Netherlands of the 1930s and 1940s, Abraham Kuyper's theories were certainly not generally cherished as everlasting hallmarks of Christian thought.

It was not Kuyper's ideas, but his deeds that lived on, and were effective in Dutch society for nearly a century. Kuyper's famous lecture on sphere sovereignty, which he gave at the opening of the Free University in 1880, would have been just a footnote of history if the Free University had failed to survive in the first difficult years after 1880. Of course, his ideas would still be of some academic interest, as it is still interesting to study John Henry Cardinal Newman's book *The Idea of a University*. But Newman's ideas were just thoughts, and the Roman Catholic university he founded in Dublin, Ireland, in

1854, turned out to be a failure. The reason that Kuyper today is still of more interest than other Christian social thinkers is that he not only had some interesting thoughts but that he made them work, as well. He was not just a social thinker, but, more than any other Dutchman, he changed Dutch society. We accept it as a mere fact that he organized a political party that came into power and delivered in this century six Reformed prime ministers in the Netherlands; we take it for granted that he founded a university that could compete with the State universities. Many of us tend to overlook these astonishing facts in order to embrace his ideas. We are like lovers who contemplate love but neglect the kisses of our beloved ones.

This is the reason that I, as a historian, would like to respond to Professor van der Vyver's paper on two key points. In doing this, I draw your attention to the roots of the so-called theory of sphere sovereignty, to save Abraham Kuyper from becoming a mythical figure and to place him and his slogans in the historical context that made him the miracle man of modern Dutch history.

First, why did Kuyper present and defend the idea of sphere sovereignty at the opening of the Free University in 1880? Not to defend the right to found a university, free from the State, would have been senseless, because this right was already provided for in Dutch law. Did he present this idea then, to convince the Reformed people in the Netherlands to choose for a free school? There was no need for that, either, because many of this group had already chosen for schools that were not State governed but that were governed by parents.

Why, then, did Kuyper speak on sphere sovereignty at the opening of the Free University? To find the answer to this question, we must realize that Kuyper had been an outstanding student at the University of Leiden, that he certainly would have deserved a professorate, but that academia closed its doors for this zealous adherent of the Reformed faith. We must realize that he had been a member of Parliament in the 1870s but had not been accepted in the political culture of his days; we must not forget that he had a newspaper of his own and was a brilliant polemicist, but was rejected as such. It was his religiously motivated ideas that were judged as behind the times, but it was, at the same time, his passion that was judged uncivilized, his criticism that was rejected as insane, his disrespect of authority that was considered a crime. Kuyper was neglected in the 1870s and when this was no longer possible, he was hated for being an opposition figure. The Kuyper of the opening speech of the Free University was an outcast; Kuyper was an outcast in politics, in academia, and he soon would be an outcast in the Church as well.

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Kuyper's speech on sphere sovereignty was a self-confident presentation of a neglected minority in Dutch society. Kuyper told his adherents and his opponents in the speech, that this university, and any other Reformed action, was no peculiarity on the edge of Dutch society, but that this was the way to make modern society move forward. Sphere sovereignty was one of the weapons of Kuyper the tactical general, of Kuyper, the outcast *en route*.

To illustrate this rather *functional* approach of the so-called theory of sphere sovereignty, I draw your attention to the fact that Kuyper formulated the idea of sphere sovereignty, repeated it once or twice—in the third Stone Lecture, for example—but that he never developed the idea, nor did any of his contemporary friends or foes. In Kuyper's hands, sphere sovereignty was mainly an instrument to make his point. It is revealing that his speech on sphere sovereignty has been out of print ever since 1880. Only when the Free University celebrated its semicentennial in 1930 and its centennial anniversary in 1980, that the speech was reprinted.[3] But that was to be reminiscent of the founding of the university, not to reflect on the idea. In Kuyper's day, sphere sovereignty never got the massive sociophilosophical dimension it has today. We must realize that sphere sovereignty was never scrutinized by Kuyper's contemporaries, and that it was his congenial critics of the 1930s who, in the end, started to analyze this concept. They immediately concluded that it was not much of a sane philosophical idea. It was not until Dooyeweerd that sphere sovereignty was reconstructed into the full-grown philosophical theory that we know so well today. I think, however, that there is more Dooyeweerd than Kuyper in this theory.

And, bluntly spoken, by that time, the idea was not dynamite anymore; sphere sovereignty now had become a theoretical concept, a great subject for academic conferences, but it did not function anymore as a crowbar in Dutch society. At this stage there was some reason for the critical remark once made, that neo-Calvinism is weak in its love for theory and in its lack of practical application. But this criticism did not know Kuyper, who did not dream of freedom, but who, as a modern Moses, outraged the Pharaoh of his days and liberated his people.

Second, now that I have said enough on Kuyper's functional use of sphere sovereignty, my second comment to Professor van der Vyver is that he takes sphere sovereignty too much as a sociophilosophical construction, while it cannot be understood without its religious setting.

When Kuyper presented his idea of sphere sovereignty, he presented it as a credo. This confession—that all sovereignty rests in God—stands squarely against that other credo, the confession of the absolute separation between the

question of sovereignty and the question of faith.[4] In his speech, Kuyper explained: "I call these *credos* about sovereignty—life convictions, not theories. 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*."[5]

Kuyper reduced the debate on sovereignty to a confrontation of two credos. He defined this antithesis in 1880 as "Sphere sovereignty defending itself against State sovereignty."[6] An important issue in nineteenth-century political thinking was sovereignty, and the enemy of the Reformed folk of his days was the liberal State. Over against this "State" the Reformed people of the Netherlands created a separate sphere, which reckoned with the soul, which practiced mercy, and which, later on, in Kuyper's own words, inspired the State "not as citizens but as confessors of the Gospel."[7]

To understand why Kuyper spoke of sovereignty in a religious way, we have to say something more than that the obvious answer, that he was a theologian or a preacher. The nineteenth-century problem of sovereignty was a religious problem, much more so than we think today. In the ancient regime as the last remnant of feudal society, the sovereign was God's representative of worldly power. As such, the king was a part of a societal structure that was based on rights and obligations. Sovereignty was an idea immediately linked to religion, to the all-encompassing bondage between God and man.

The object of the French Revolution was to destroy this bond. Sovereignty was no longer seen as a religious matter; it was a purely rational matter. The word *sovereignty* became closely related to the word *autonomy*. It was no longer God who was king of kings, but reason. The French king Louis XVI was beheaded, and the vacant chair of sovereignty was taken by the people themselves. It was this revolution in the understanding of sovereignty that determined the agenda of nineteenth-century political thinking.

The French Revolution has often been analyzed in social, political, and rational terms, but it is interesting that nowadays even an influential historian on the French Revolution such as François Furet ended his *Dixctionnaire Critique de la Revolution Francaise* of 1988 with the sigh: "The French Revolution is over, but it has never been explained/elucidated.… What can explain the madness, so characteristic of the French Revolution?"[8]

It is interesting that Kuyper wanted to restore the religious interpretation of sovereignty in post-revolutionary society. The Achilles' heel of modern thinking on politics and society, in Kuyper's opinion, was not that it had rejected the sovereign king or that sovereignty was handed over to the people, but that it had crushed the freedom of the people by denying the religious roots of sovereignty, freedom, and justice. Without the religious foundation of sovereignty,

Kuyper stated, one "cannot grant to the other spheres a more generous freedom than that which the State permits them out of its weakness or confers out of its supremacy."[9]

The first to be confronted with this lack of freedom in the new nineteenth-century political structure of the Netherlands were the Reformed and the Catholics, whose rights to religious freedom—in their case—the right to education in their own way, were denied to preserve the unity of the modern nation State.

The liberals could not solve this problem without giving up their monolithic conviction of sovereignty, which led to their opinion that the State is responsible for educating its citizens.

The main contribution of Kuyper to the solution of this problem was to remodel the old, religiously rooted idea of sovereignty. Sovereignty, for Kuyper, was no longer linked either to the king or to the people. No, sovereignty was something delegated to different spheres in society. This is considered to be Kuyper's most original contribution to social and political thought.

To understand Kuyper correctly, it is important to look a bit closer at the word *sovereignty*. He did not use the word, mainly to defend the *right* of the Church or the family to manage its own affairs, a right they had because they were endowed with an internal enclave of domestic powers. This way of talking about sphere sovereignty severs the idea from its roots.

When Kuyper explained his idea of sphere sovereignty, he did not talk about *right*, but about the order of *creation*. We must forget our modern way of interpreting the notion of sovereignty and take the word in the way Kuyper meant it: Sovereignty is authority, delegated to man by his Creator. Understood in this way, sovereignty has more to do with *responsibility* than with *right*. Sovereignty is the vocation of different spheres to follow Christ. God delegated his sovereignty equally to all. He followed Calvin in his view on man, who had an office to hold in his day-to-day-life, in his home, at work, and in the streets. In Kuyper's well-known words: "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]

By relating all human sovereignty directly to Christ, Kuyper stressed that the answer to the question of sovereignty "will vary depending on whether you stand within or without the orbit of Revelation."[11]

How dangerous it can be to talk about sphere sovereignty *without* its religious setting, is shown in the history of the demise of the Kuyperian tradition in the Netherlands, already referred to by Peter Heslam and James Kennedy.

Kuyper already warned of the danger of losing the religious setting of sphere sovereignty when, he, in his prayer at the end of his opening speech of the Free University, asked God to destroy this institution, if it ever would want or mean anything else than praising and serving its sovereign, Jesus Christ.[12]

There is one other point I would like to make.

In his defense of sphere sovereignty over against the liberals and conservatives of his day, Kuyper mainly dealt with the question of the *delegation* of sovereignty. Kuyper hardly dealt with questions that interest us today, such as the definition of a sphere, or the relation of the spheres to the State, or the question of controlling this far-flung sovereignty. We must, however, keep in mind, that Kuyper did not proclaim all and sundry to be spheres. In his speech he mentioned the personal life, the family, the university, and the Church. He just wanted to make clear that "Our human life … is neither simple nor uniform, but constitutes an infinitely complex organism," and that each sphere "has been drawn on a fixed radius from the center of a unique principle."[13] But he neither defined the sphere nor the principle of each sphere.

It is, therefore, a tricky thing to take Kuyper's idea of sphere sovereignty as a well-defined doctrine and apply it to realities such as race, gender, ethnic groups, or the self-determination of peoples.

Kuyper's main contribution to Christian social thought is that he used the well-known idea of vocation as it was formulated in the days of the Reformation, and remodeled it to offer a solution to the nineteenth-century problem of the relation between State and society.

I come now to my conclusions.

First, the fact that Kuyper's ideas were not, in the first place, sociological, juridical, or philosophical, but religious, made them strong. We may think that the religious setting of Kuyper's ideas makes them weak, in a sense, but it is religion that sets us free from all sorts of oppression, political, social, or economic. Kuyper's life and work teaches us that religion is a power far more stronger than science or civilization. This is especially the case when religion is rooted among the people. The history of Kuyper's days has made this fact evident.[14]

Second, I cannot stress strongly enough that Kuyper's social ideas always served practical goals. That may puzzle us, but maybe it is of some relief that this blend of ideas and objectives puzzled Kuyper's contemporaries as well. It is typical that when, in 1884, Jhr. A.F. de Savornin Lohman was appointed a professor of law at the Free University, he objected to Kuyper's remark in his newspaper, that the law department of his university now would become a breeding place for anti-revolutionary politicians. No, the new professor

replied, "Teaching law is a high calling that may never be subjected to party politics."[15] Later on, when this same professor complained that Kuyper was the greatest actor he had known in his whole life; he was not being complimentary.

If Kuyper's contemporaries and colleagues already had difficulties with his tactical maneuvers, we certainly have to take into account the strong bond between Kuyper's ideas and objectives. The exportation of Kuyper's ideas to other continents can only be successful if his historical context is seriously taken into account. Misinterpretations of his ideas have already led to serious problems. What is needed in Kuyper research is a study, not of Kuyper's ideas, but of Kuyper's ideas in the historical setting in which he formulated them.

Notes

1. R. H. Woltjer, *Dr. A. Kuyper in Jezus ontslapen den achtsten november 1920* (Baarn: E. J. Bosch, 1920), 35.
2. K. Schilder, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, vol. 4 (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1951), 17.
3. In 1880, two identical editions of the speech on sphere sovereignty were published by J. H. Kruyt in Amsterdam. The third edition was published in 1930 by J. H. Kok in Kampen. The fourth edition of 1981, published by Rodopi in Amsterdam was a photomechanical reprint of the 1880 edition. The speech has also been published in W. F. de Gaay Fortman, ed., *Architectonische kritiek. Fragmenten uit de sociaal-politieke geschriften van dr. A. Kuyper* (Amsterdam: H. J. Paris).
4. Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 468.
5. Ibid., 468.
6. Ibid., 469.
7. Ibid., 471.
8. W. Aalders, *Revolutie en perestroika. Kritische kanttekeningen bij het tweede eeuwfeest van de Franse revolutie* (Kampen: Kok Voorhoeve, 1990), 50.
9. Bratt, *Centennial Reader*, 468.
10. Ibid., 488.
11. Ibid., 466.

12. This prayer is not in Bratt's translation.
13. Bratt, *Centennial Reader*, 467.
14. See H. Bavinck to C. Snouck Hurgronje, 28 January 1915, in J. de Bruijn en G. Harinck, ed., *Een Leidse vriendschap. De briefwisseling tussen Herman Bavinck en Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, 1875–1921* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1999), 174–75.
15. *De Heraut*, 27 January and 3 February 1884.