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A successful application of the Principle of Distributed Authority, or Sphere Sovereignty

How dedicated leadership steered social change in a country by alluding to the Christian notion of creation and saw its success proven in society 150 years later.

Abstract

The article traces the articulation of the principle of distributed authority, or sphere sovereignty, and its background in politics and theology. It considers the two Dutch national leaders who used and developed it most as well as noting some of its earlier sources. An account is given of the way the principle of distributed authority arose and what it meant to the thinkers and leaders of the Anti-Revolutionary Party in the Netherlands, arguably the first modern political party worldwide. The principle and its articulation is chronicled through the long struggle for the distribution of educational, ecclesiastical, and political authority (sovereignty) to those people active in various areas, each understood as sovereign spheres. The article shows the crucial role played by Abraham Kuyper in the step by step formulation of the principle. Finally, the article suggests that the principle had great importance in the thought of the Kuyper descendent Herman Dooyeweerd, known for his elaborate societal philosophy and his fierce and early criticism of European tyranny in the 20th century.

The whole wheel of life majestically revolves on the axis of sovereignty.

KUYPER 1907, Section 18

1 Introduction

Abraham Kuyper's idea of distributed authority, expressed in the original Dutch phrase as *souvereiniteit in eigen kring* (sovereignty in [its or one's] own sphere) was worked out and publicized by him during his many years as newspaper editor, scholar, church leader, MP, co-founder of an university and eventually Prime Minister of the Netherlands. Put succinctly, Kuyper's principle outlined a normative *pattern* for healthy societal relationships of authority. It gradually became the basis of many of the practical policies he introduced during his long public career. He was followed a generation later by Herman Dooyeweerd who developed a philosophical system with the help of this principle, exploiting its broad philosophical implications.

2 Background

Many historians (including G. Groen van Prinsterer and A. Kuyper) view the birth of the Dutch **Republic** in the 16th century as inexorably linked to the issue of authority, the conditions making it legitimate and justifying resistance to absolute authority. They believed that the sixteenth-century leaders of the Dutch Republic understood themselves as acting within a legal framework to become the first modern Western nation to resist tyranny without falling prey to revolutionary motives. (Het Wilhelmus, the Dutch national anthem, also portrays the struggle in this way.) They believed there were various sources and centers of authority, legal competency or

sovereignty, lawfully vested in the “lesser magistrates,” not just one – as well as limits to every earthly authority. Rather than simply disregarding and dishonoring the authority ruling over them, the sixteenth-century Dutch leaders appealed to higher authority to justify the creation of their new federated state, the seven United States of the Netherlands. This was formulated in the Act of Abjuration of 1581 and followed by a period in search for just authority which led to independence in 1588. They understood this not as a revolution but as a restoration of law and legitimate sovereignty. In this rather unusual case, practice gave rise to theory. Reflecting upon these events and this history, Johannes Althusius formulated his famous theory of political symbiosis or Federalism. He argues that ‘Peculiar to each type of association are distinct laws by which each is governed, and these laws differ and diverge from association to association according to the nature of each’ ([Althusius 1610](#), Chapter 1). An influential account of the struggle was written more than two centuries later by the historian and statesman Groen van Prinsterer. He was the official royal archivist of the House of Orange who painstakingly read and then wrote extensively about the birth of the Dutch Republic. Groen became known for this as well as for his criticism of the “Spirit of Revolution” – European Enlightenment Rationalism taken to the streets. He argues that the Enlightenment gave birth to the rejection of (the Christian) *faith*, and that in Western Europe ‘unbelief leads to revolution.’ In the preface to the second edition of his famous book, *Unbelief and Revolution* (1868), Groen traces the process of apostasy from Christianity and contrasts it with what he called “the emergence of an Anti-Revolutionary worldview.”

In the last ten years of Groen’s life he became the mentor and coach of a young scholar-pastor named Abraham Kuyper. The two of them worked cooperatively and carried on a regular personal correspondence. Their published correspondence fills some four hundred pages. They participated in various projects and committees, and supplied one another with an abundance of each other’s own scholarly, political, and “religious” writings. Groen was a leader of the political *movement* which Kuyper later organized into an official political *party*, viz. the Anti-Revolutionary Party (1878). Out of their mutual concern for the well-being of their nation a comprehensive perspective (and political platform) grew.

Kuyper was very much in touch with “intellectual-spiritual” developments in the European culture of his day. Partly due to the growth of centralized government and technology, he believed *authority* had become a key issue of the day. He took sovereignty to be indispensable in political, social, and ecclesiastical matters and hence it had to be understood, described, and delegated properly. One of the negative influences Kuyper saw behind the contemporary discussions and dilemmas was that of “Kantian” thinking about the origin of “form.” In his autobiographical writing *Confidentie*, Kuyper mentions Kant’s influence (followed by Rousseau) and especially the later development of Kant’s thought in Fichte. According to Kuyper, Fichte teaches that ‘there is nothing except the thinking intellect’ (Kuyper 1873, 54). Fichte’s Idealism, he says, ‘While it could be enjoyed by few, had an impact upon human thought which gradually reached the remotest corners (of Europe). Only a few read him, but those who did were in turn men of reputation, trend setters in all the disciplines ... and those who read their books imbibed this intoxicating Idealism without realizing it’ (loc.cit.). This, continues Kuyper, is ‘the source of the growing disparagement of form and the reason a one-sided spiritualism, over against the tangible and symbolic, has taken possession of the contemporary mind’ (loc.cit.). Kuyper sees these same philosophical sentiments as earlier having fueled the French

Encyclopedists. Again following Groen, he associates the Encyclopedists with the basic pattern of thought behind the revolution, which he, like Groen, calls, “the spirit of revolution.” It held that “The human spirit can create new life according to its own desire, out of itself” (Kuyper 1873, 55). This is Fichte’s ‘the I posits the non-I.’ And according to Kuyper it is the source of the radical rejection by philosophers and scholars of all *given authority*, any given form or boundary as anything more than something posited by the human will itself.¹

In an early article written in 1868, Kuyper rejects what he called “intellectualistic Christianity” (his “The Curse of the Intellectualistic Trend”: Kuyper 1868b). He argues against what he considers the rationalistic approach to life and truth. Like Groen he shares the Romantics’ fierce rejection of Enlightenment Rationalism, the view that life was best lived when dominated by reason, critical thinking, *theoria*. But while he rejected the exaltation of the “intellectual life” as the highest form of existence, he does not share the Romantics’ wholesale rejection of critical thought, nor their exaltation of human feeling (of the sublime) as the supreme human experience. What Kuyper exalted in was life in fellowship with God, life redeemed and restored in Christ, and lived in communion with the Holy Spirit. For Kuyper it was neither reason nor emotion that was most important, but *life*, a gift from God experienced as an organic whole; *life* was paramount. His key term is not “abundance,” or “the good,” but simply “life” as a gift of God. The point Kuyper makes in his many discourses is that humans should feed and depend not on their own minds, emotions and environment, but upon the Maker of their minds and emotions, the real Source of existence. His opposition to both the Enlightenment and to Romanticism was religious and historical as well as philosophical.

To many of his orthodox brethren at this time, the mind and Christian doctrine were the center of religion, almost like the Deists’ view. As Kuyper sees things, the living relationship to the Infinite was in danger of being replaced by a reliance on mental activity.

We will now consider the context out of which the slogan “sovereignty in [its or one’s] own sphere” arose. Although it has religious and philosophical roots it was through Groen’s struggle to overcome the economic and social hardships foisted upon parents and parishioners by certain nineteenth century Dutch governmental policies (its republican system being changed into a monarchy after the invasion of France in an effort to tackle politics of scale) that the question of the range and nature of authority became a burning issue in the Netherlands. It was primarily in a political context as can be seen from Groen’s extensive writings during the many years he served in parliament. The main hardships and publicly disputed topics surrounding its derivation were: 1) state control of the church institution; 2) ubiquitous state control of schooling and the character of the education it offered; and 3) the vaccine controversy, i.e., mandatory inoculation of all school children using the cowpox vaccine. These three issues were provoking incessant regional and national political disputes. The first issue even provoked another round of immigration to Iowa and Michigan in the U.S.A. Countless parliamentary resolutions and even constitutional revisions were drafted in an attempt to resolve these conflicts. None, however, proved successful. There was much unhappiness about the way the state was “running” these institutions. Many people wanted to withdraw from them but could not because of social, moral, or financial reservations. These were the conditions Groen labored under from 1837 until 1867 when his youthful associate Kuyper joined him in the struggle. The independence of the church congregation from the state (a founding

principle of the Dutch society) and the rights of the parents to determine the character of their own children's education were matters of freedom of conscience and issues Groen and then Kuyper had to address.

By the late 1860s Groen had been arguing his position on these issues in parliament, the press, and scholarly treatises for thirty years. But despite his tenacious defense of the freedom of conscience and the right to follow religious principles in public matters, and to have "independence in one's own sphere" he had won only limited active support among fellow parliamentarians and the wider public. The issues, however, did not go away but continued to create personal suffering for: 1) parents, unable to afford private (Christian) education for their children; 2) Christians who resisted the contemporary state controlled church organization and "modernistic" pastors; and 3) patriots concerned about the (centralizing) direction their country was taking. Groen's labors were not in vain, however, because the positions he formulated and uncompromisingly defended so long were soon picked up and sharpened by Dr Abraham Kuyper.

3 Taking Over From Groen

In general, it appears that while adopting many of Groen's ideas, Kuyper was sufficiently independent and creative to express and further develop them in his own way. Groen was like the steady, slow-moving first stage of a rocket that set the course; Kuyper then followed like the lighter, second stage of a booster rocket, lifting the project into orbit. Groen had sought to resolve the national issues and to rally popular support, especially among confessionally oriented Christian people. But it was Kuyper, following the pioneering efforts of Groen, who actually succeeded in mobilizing wide popular support. One reason, no doubt, was that he could speak the language of the ordinary people. His years as pastor in the small rural village of Beesd had prepared him for Utrecht, Amsterdam, and then The Hague! When Kuyper began writing tracts he quickly gathered support from a very wide variety of people and classes for what had long been Groen's Anti-Revolutionary principles. However, the national troubles did not allow for quick or easy solutions, but dragged on.

The majority of Kuyper's early ideas were not original as such. Many were borrowed from Groen. The Calvinist outlook which they shared made this borrowing straightforward and allowed Kuyper to use great portions of Groen's already developed thinking about history, the Christian faith, and (political) authority. As a result of the persistence of the school and church controversies, however, Kuyper was challenged again and again to refine and further articulate Groen's Anti-Revolutionary principles. The issues were a constant source of pressure and incentive, especially once Kuyper entered politics. He had to expand upon and further clarify Groen's and his own ideas in order to give them more persuasive force. Kuyper's desire to reach and persuade a wider public meant that his views were often not presented in a theoretical or systematic manner as such. In particular he sought new ways of defending the 'autonomy' or 'independence of the Church,' and the rights of parents against the state's tendency to 'push aside the unique character of family and life style,' (1869c, 46). Like Groen, he opposed the unbridled growth of state power, and repeatedly called for "decentralization." At times his arguments were largely polemical, presupposing the validity of the principles either of "separation" or "independence" – but he also worked hard to articulate these principles further. One demand was simple: "Turn back to the foundation that the Lord God laid in his commandments and statutes and ordinances by returning the authority to the

parents over their own offspring' (1871a, 453). We should not forget that this happened in a context where the primacy of the nuclear family over the extended family was already a broadly expected feature for several centuries.

In an early statement concerning the proper relationship between church and state, Kuyper argues that 'the church and the state have their own calling for themselves to fulfill ... and each has its own sphere' (1867, 272). Kuyper's dissertation (1862) – a comparative study of different views of the church – had prepared him well for the task now at hand. Already in his early treatises he appears to have some definite views, for example, when he says, 'Christ alone is Sovereign in the Church' (1873, 6); 'In the nature of the case, the Lord's sovereignty must be acknowledged within the walls of the Church, even more completely than anywhere else' and 'the church obeys one Sovereign' (1873, 8), that is, Christ. It is therefore quite credible that Kuyper should claim in 1873, in his autobiographical writing, that his preoccupation with the wellbeing of the church was deeply rooted and longstanding indeed. The major part of that writing is devoted to the demonstration of this claim. Kuyper's view is basically the same as the one Groen had taught. Independence follows from calling, that is, independence is necessary to carry out one's responsibilities, and since the church has its own unique responsibilities, it (like other spheres) must be free and independent to exercise that authority.

In Kuyper's early historical study, 'The Establishment of our Reformed Church and the Struggle for Her Independent Existence' (written in 1867, published in 1869 in Dutch), he made similar claims but on different, i.e., historical, grounds. As early as the sixteenth century, he says, the Netherlands had known 'a free Church in a free State' (1869b, 80), outlining the historical precedent of the claim. But in 1816 this was abruptly undone by the government's organizing of a national (*Hervormde*) church. Kuyper therefore wanted to demonstrate the validity of the churches' right to autonomy over against this (mis)use of governmental authority. The next extensive attempt to do so was made in his article 'Emancipation of the Church I' (Kuyper 1869d). Here he again asks the question: Why should the church be free? His first answer is that the national constitution of 1815 guarantees the right to religious freedom, inimical to state control of the church. But what are the grounds of this right? Kuyper approaches this problem from various angles, one of which is 'the nature of its own unique life,' or 'life-principle' (Kuyper 1869d). His understanding of "church" is that 'every local congregation remains a church of Christ in itself'; each is an organism drawing its life immediately from God, through the work of the Holy Spirit. The independence which the church congregation rightfully has is based on its relationship of direct dependence upon God!

Kuyper states this again in another way in 1870, when he argues for 'Freedom, because the organism of our church displays a nature of its own, spells out to us its life-principle, and even constitutes the life-sphere necessary for it to flourish' (1870a, 344). Here he is claiming that because the church has its own distinct life and nature, i.e., like an organism, one directly dependent upon God, it too is a "life-sphere," properly possessing independence and authority in its own affairs. This represents only a modest refinement of his position; important, however, because it again contributes something to the theological and philosophical background of his view that the church, and every other distinctive sphere of life, is properly considered independent in its own internal affairs – and to be limited only when it encroaches upon the internal affairs of another. Determining what constitutes an "internal" affair of a sphere is a delicate matter both in theory and in practice – as we shall see. By constituting a life-sphere, the church (as well as various other institutions) may

rightfully claim independence from state interference and authority regarding whatever properly comprises *its own affairs*.

Kuyper's view does not ultimately rest here, however, at least not regarding the church. For him, 'only Christ is sovereign in his congregation' (Kuyper 1871b). This is a theme to which Kuyper repeatedly returns. And this view is part of the Christian confession of (and typically Calvinist emphasis on) the *sovereignty* of God. Jesus Christ, he proclaims, is sovereign in every life-sphere. This is the background of various slogans Kuyper coined, such as 'For each life of its own, a form of its own' (1869e, 32) or 'all must fight in their own sphere' (1869c, 28).

As the up-and-coming leader of the Anti-Revolutionary political movement, Kuyper worked hard and was gifted at finding catchy ways of expressing key ideas or clusters of thought in a single phrase. He wanted to express the reality of distinct, individual spheres and to acknowledge (the necessity of) the *unity* of reality as a whole under God. Kuyper habitually used the phrase "in all the areas of life" (1913, 9, 31, 279; 1869e, 32). *Life* was a unity in Christ, and *all the areas*, the diversity. Kuyper would only celebrate forms of diversity which also embraced unity, and would only embrace forms of unity which endorsed diversity. Sphere sovereignty is a unity-diversity principle, a diversity principle in that it recognizes multiple relatively autonomous centers of authority, not just one or a few, and a unity principle in that it recognizes the symbiotic interdependent relationship of the various spheres or centers of authority.

After 1869, the term "sphere" gradually took on a technical sense for Kuyper. Though not explicitly defined, it came to refer to a social or societal category, or sort, with certain typical characteristics. In many cases it involved the characteristics or quality of being an organism: 'Because the church is an organism, the church has its own life and hence a legal principle or status (*rechtsbeginsel*) of its own' (1913, 345). The church for Kuyper, and the home, like 'every sphere of nurture, is by nature ... an organism and an institute' (ibid.). He spoke often of "organisms," "organs," "organizations," and things "organic": 'Every one of the organs of our spirit ...' (1913, 86); 'Her organization, that characteristic of one's own self-sufficiency ...' (1869a, 34); 'Everything has to develop itself organically' (1868a, 299); and 'The spiritual organism of the Scriptures' (1870b, 12). The church, he says, is 'an organism because it lives according to its own rule' (1913, 333). Part of "its own rule" is the mutual care or symbiotic relationship of its members. Such relationships of mutual service are characteristic or part of what makes a sphere a sphere.

As an institute the church is the result of conscious human design, but as an organism it is a living response to the Word and work of God in and among believers. If these metaphors seem imprecise it is probably because Kuyper was not writing for academics but for ordinary people, using images to help them see why the church, school, family, etc. should fight for independence in their own affairs and not be controlled by the state.

3.1 Civil (dis)Obedience

At a personal level the authority and status of institutions involved the question of a person's duty to obey or refuse allegiance within any particular sphere of authority. Kuyper's view on this issue was clear and pronounced: 'But the people proudly obeyed the ruler for God's will not against God's will, herein lay the limit of Caesar's power. As soon a Caesar gives a command to do what God forbids, or forbids what God commands, the faithful Christian people do not fear those who can only kill the body but not the soul, they obey God more than men' This is supplemented with the statement that 'all power is from God. The power, not the exercise thereof' (Kuyper

[1873b](#)). The date of these statements is significant because they came just before a four-part book review appeared from Kuyper's hand ([Kuyper 1873c](#)) of C.W. Opzoomer's *The Limits of State Power*). Kuyper says the Christian's obedience to the state is and ought to be consciously subordinate to his or her submission to God and the commandments of Scripture. Even the king is "dependent" upon God. In this way it should be possible to disobey and even oppose the government with a clear conscience, and without falling prey to the "spirit of revolution," as Groen described it. Moreover, according to Kuyper, 'if God's Sovereignty bears the government of the world, then He can accomplish his purposes either through heroic deeds, or through the sins of rulers and people – the consequences of which must be reckoned with, in regard to judgments of guilt' ([Kuyper 1873b](#)).

3.2 Opzoomer

A crucial moment in the articulation of Kuyper's principle came in a four-part book review published in his newspaper, *De Standaard*, starting 31 Jan. 1873. Many of his previous attempts to demarcate the boundaries of state and church authority crystallize in this review. He asked: How does Opzoomer delimit state power? What kinds of things may the state engage in? Are there boundaries and if so where do they lie? Opzoomer considered four different approaches to answering these questions. The first system favored unlimited state power. The second wished to limit state power by means of a constitution. The third was the organic view of the state; and the fourth the utilitarian view set forth by J.S. Mill. 'From this review [of systems],' Kuyper says, 'Opzoomer draws the conclusion that the limits of state power cannot be designated' ([Kuyper 1873c](#)). To this Kuyper responds by saying that Opzoomer's conclusion undermines the value of his book. Nevertheless, Opzoomer is aware of the threat state coercion can pose, saying "I can leave every association of which I am a member except that of the state" (loc. cit.).

In his book Opzoomer says, 'The result of my study is partly negative since the great promise of giving us a fixed principle was not fulfilled' ([Opzoomer 1873](#), 80). But he not only fails to find a fixed principle to oppose state absolutism, says Kuyper, he also preaches skepticism, or a doubting attitude which is destructive of liberty. In the last two parts of Kuyper's review we see how his dissatisfaction with Opzoomer's work spurs him on to formulate his own positive view on the boundaries of (governmental) sovereignty and power. Kuyper lists various factors: 1) popular rights; 2) the guardianship of the European family of nations; and 3) an ethical power residing in the human heart. Any one of these can limit state power, 'as long as one does not conceive of a state apart from God' ([Kuyper 1873c](#)). He sketches the problem(s) as follows: In a sense the state stands above all other earthly powers, it is the "sphere of spheres." But besides the state there are other life-spheres which also have a right and a status of their own. What is the temporal basis of these rights? What guarantees their independent status and how is this status to be defended, and by whom – particularly in light of the state's possession of so much power?

In response to his own questions Kuyper combines observations he has made over the past six or seven years. The first limit on any claim to power is the existence of God Almighty. Furthermore, there are various different life-spheres, each with its own given character, as he says, 'ideally and historically a creation of God' ([Kuyper 1873d](#)); *ideally*, in the sense that the structure is given by God; *historically*, in that each sphere is culturally unfolded and given distinctive shape over time. Each has its own "life-law" or "ordinances," and hence its own unique "nature" or "principles." The particular form that they take can vary. 'We do not have to organize society; we have only to develop the germ of organization that God himself has created in our human nature' (1891b; 2011, 62). The spheres are each distinct "organisms" or

“expressions of life.” The temporal forms the spheres receive are partly dependent on the way they are understood and unfolded by a culture, which determines the historical shape and form they take. The recognition they receive (as independent spheres) can be a more or less legitimate expression of their life-law or ordinances. Since this process involves human responsibility, it is clear that it is not merely a mechanical one, but necessarily involves free human form-giving and acts embodying some recognition of a norm. Kuyper speaks of the ‘unique form in which the ideal is realized by different nations’ (Kuyper [1873e](#)). The church, for example, is legally recognized as a public and not merely as a private institution (normatively speaking), but receives many different manifestations. Kuyper defends this view, arguing that the church is both historically and by nature entitled to the status of a unique public sphere.

The obligation to observe this status first ought to be felt in the conscience of the individual citizen. The conscience of a nation can be stirred in a collective response that in turn can affect the people’s future and the state as a whole (Kuyper [1873e](#)). One of the tasks of a true leader is to stir or awaken the conscience of the nation. The *first limit* upon state power is hence *an ethical one*; it is in the conscience of the individual and then of the community as a whole. Ethical conscience gives rise to a sense of justice regarding the right of each different life-sphere internally to be independent. Accordingly, public opinion plays a role in the limiting of state power.²

Yet another way the limits on state power are maintained is through the force of historical precedent and custom manifest in various contexts. Perhaps surprisingly this, according to Kuyper, accounts for the greatest limitation on state power. He mentions the effect of the healthy growth and expansion of the different life-spheres and then explains the natural constraint represented by other states:

Every power is unlimited which does not have another power beside or above itself from the start or contained in itself. The power of every state is limited when another state lies beside it which is self-sufficient and independent like itself. . . . Besides this boundary which is guarded by power or physical force, lies still another. . . .

[H]istorical rights (historical claims to justice) are often better than a powerful army. With very few troops on our borders it remains what it is by right. Nearly the same holds true of the limits of state power from above. The state too is not born of itself, but is ideally and historically a creation of God. . . .The state’s power finds its limitations in God and His ordinances. In God Himself, because His existence alone makes absolute state power an absurdity. In His ordinances the same thing holds true as far as both His holy commandments and His ordering of the nations is concerned.

KUYPER 1873e; 1873d

Exactly the same phenomena repeat themselves in the area of the state itself. The same is true of the boundary of state law, to which professor Opzoomer more intentionally refers, the same distinction between the boundaries of physical and the boundaries of an ethical nature. This is the only way to explain it, if one is to recognize a people for what it is and is aware of the different life-spheres which are not themselves arbitrary but according to the demands of God’s ordinances are present in the life of a people. These spheres are many-fold and form groups.

[KUYPER 1873d](#)

Kuyper adds yet another argument in his review, taken from the Bible. It is from 1 Corinthians 12 which speaks of each different part or member of the human body having its own place and function in the whole that cannot be usurped by another.

While Kuyper, following Groen, had already spoken for a long time of the “independence” of life-spheres, in this article he attributes something new to them. He uses the term *sovereignty*, “sovereignty of every life in [its] own sphere” (*souvereiniteit van elk leven in eigen kring*), and “sovereignty of persons in (his or her) own sphere” (Kuyper 1873d). In a sermon entitled ‘Freedom,’ preached in Amsterdam two months later, Kuyper explains how freedom is connected to *sovereignty*. ‘Free,’ he says, ‘is everyone bound by his own life-sphere, who can resist all that which does not belong to him’ (Kuyper 1873a; 1913, 402). In other words, anyone who accepts the task and limit of working within their own sphere of calling is free. He then speaks of ‘spheres which unfold themselves’ (1913, 403). He ends his sermon saying: ‘Unfree, is the fish which though unfettered lies on dry ground; and you make it free precisely by binding and enclosing it in the water’ (1913, 402).

4 The Expression “Sphere Sovereignty”

The classic Dutch phrase *souvereiniteit in eigen kring* (“sovereignty in [its or one’s] own sphere”) first appears in an address Kuyper gives a few months later in November 1873 called ‘Calvinism: Source and Stronghold of our Constitutional Liberties.’³ Kuyper represents it as a quotation from Groen’s *Nederlandsche Gedachten* (1873). In a personal letter to Groen, written 25 Nov. 1873, Kuyper calls his address, ‘my commentary upon your *Calvinism origin and safeguard ...*’ and he includes an outline of it for Groen’s benefit.⁴ The address is an historical interpretation of the origin and emergence of (European) constitutional forms of government, illustrating their connections to a Calvinistic view of life and authority. It discusses *magisterial sovereignty*, its derivation and legitimate use, how and on what terms governments exercise power and authority. It bears similarities to questions asked in Hubert Languet’s *Vindiciae* about obeying God and opposing a ruler who repeatedly violates God’s law. It includes discussions of how far people, particularly the *secondary authorities* (*magistratus inferiores*), should go in opposing a ruler who becomes a tyrant and is destroying the state. Kuyper argues that out of the Calvinist struggles to determine the biblical principles for the proper use and relationships of authority in the church came the type of understanding and practice that gave rise to Western constitutional forms of government. In this way, according to Kuyper, the question of the proper nature of authority, and church governance in particular, has proven invaluable for the whole of (Western) civilization.

Kuyper claims that our constitutional liberties are endangered by the gradual loss of independence of such institutions as the province, the city, family, court, and educational entities, e.g., university, corporation, or guilds. He rhetorically asks, ‘Have not all the independent institutions, invested with sovereignty in [their] own sphere, which are supposed to offer points of resistance to the spell of the single indivisible state, succumbed to it?’ (1874, 6). Prior to this, Kuyper had spoken in terms of “power” and “independence” in relation to the state and other life-spheres, but not of “sovereignty.” He now uses the term in reference to the spheres and their mutual relationships.

The state, as he explains it here, draws its authority in the same way and from the same source as all other spheres. The first extensively developed view on this question (from this standpoint), he claims here, was found in Languet’s Calvinistic system of constitutional law. He formulates this perspective as follows (Kuyper 1874, 43–44): 1) All sovereignty descends from God; 2) the sovereignty of the Crown rests

not in the person of the king, nor even in the abstract royal office; 3) it rests in an organic tie of this office with the *magistratus inferiores* (the secondary authorities); and 4) the latter are not the king's appointed officers but they are authorities who have power independently of the will of the king – in the states and parliaments: *reni officiarum, non regis*. 'The *magistratus inferiores*, just like the king, receive a portion of the state's sovereignty from God. They stand with him before the King of kings, responsible to see to it that authority is used for the blessing of a people. The king's failure to carry out his duty does not release these magistrates from their oaths. If the king does not stand guard, then they must do so even if the king himself is the oppressor.' 'Here we see,' Kuyper continues, 'the first seed of constitutional government with its deepest root not in the people but in God' (1874, 43–44). In conclusion he says, 'It is still this same concept of sovereignty in [one's] own sphere, which allows the boundary line to be drawn between popular rule and our constitutional form of government' (ibid., 44). This way of thinking about earthly authority, he argues, is a fruit of the Calvinist confession of the complete sovereignty of God: 'From this confession comes the conviction that all authority and power on earth is not inherent but delegated, so that neither nobility nor the people can be said to be sovereign by nature' (ibid., 50). This is a key notion: power is 'not inherent but delegated.'⁵

As we have seen, shortly after Kuyper gave the definitive formulation to the phrase he identified it with Groen's long standing principle of "independence or self-sufficiency in [its] own sphere." We see this again in an article entitled 'Constitutional' in *De Standaard*, 22 Jan. 1876. There he states that 'Groen and his loyal followers have continually and emphatically pointed out the fact that in the church, the family, in science and art, in trade and industry, to summarize, in every area of societal life there exists sovereignty in [its] own sphere, which is not granted by the state, but comes directly from God's provision without intervention from the state' ([Kuyper 1876](#)).

After 1875, the principle and term "sphere sovereignty" was a standard part of Kuyper's vocabulary. In 1879, a series of Kuyper's newspaper articles were compiled under the title *Ons Program*, to provide a basis for the Anti-Revolutionary Party, for its platform; they included a section on the topic of "sovereignty."

According to Kuyper every sphere of authority is the result of some ordinance. Behind the perceived regularities in empirical reality there were ordinances used by God to govern, guide, and pressure the unfolding of human and non-human life. Kuyper puts it as follows:

In the area of thinking there is an authority ... [i.e.,] laws of thought, a power of logic which governs the forming of every judgment ... [S]uch authority is essential and is present in every human action, whether it be in industry, agriculture, seamanship, or commerce. And all of these types of authority are (in the nature of the case) instituted, maintained and exercised neither by contract nor by legal determination but only by the Father, the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth ... And so in the area of study and business there is nothing else for us to do except to discover the laws and ordinances which God has placed there.

KUYPER 1879, 31⁶

The different types of authority, corresponding to different spheres, pertain to the ways each area of life-activity is normatively ordered and developed. Each sphere of life-activity is (properly speaking) governed internally by its own norm or ordinance, since authority is distributed within each for the regulating of different functions.

The sovereign authority in the literal sense, that is exercised among the peoples of the earth, must work harmoniously together with the laws that govern human life, with the laws of wind and land and water and regulate the life of animals in their development of power, with the laws that have guided the history of our people and other nations; and only when this whole collection of laws including those for our thought (logic), willing (ethics), feeling (aesthetics) and eternal life (religion) are operating in a right and adequate connection together, does the whole wheel of life majestically revolve on the axis of sovereignty.

KUYPER 1907, Section 18

It is not surprising that Kuyper then claims ‘God called institutions of many different orders into being, and upon each He bestowed a certain degree of power. Thus, the power that He delegates, he *divides up*. He did not give all power to any one entity but gave to each that power which accorded with its nature and calling’ (1879, 85, 90).

The division of power reflects differences of task and operation. Each sphere in society has its special job that it can do and which characterizes it. The college does not do what industry does, nor the professor what the artist does. The politician does not perform the work the doctor performs. Each sphere has something special, an activity or function that distinguishes it and allows it to symbiotically serve the rest. Each indicates a type or realm of activity that should be free and not interfered with by another. This freedom is needed to accomplish its task, involving what Kuyper called “the middle point holding it securely together.”

One practical consequence of this principle is that every attempt by the state (or any other body) to exercise control outside its own life-sphere is taken by Kuyper to be a ‘violation of God’s ordinances, and resistance to such is not a crime but a duty’ (1879, Section 21). ‘Political authority only functions alongside a diversity of other authorities which in the natural and the intellectual world, in society and family, have an existence just as holy and absolute’ (1879, 32). Hence, defining the lawful boundaries of authority, where one ends and another begins, is not a limiting ‘of sovereignty but only a delineation of its natural boundaries’ (loc.cit.).

5 From 1880 Onward

In 1880 the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam was officially opened, largely inspired by Kuyper’s leadership. As rector of the new university, the task fell to Kuyper to deliver the opening address describing its foundation, organizing principle, and guideline for teaching and research. The university should reckon with both the variety and unity of life, demarcating limits and establishing responsibilities and authority. ‘From now on “sovereignty in [its] own sphere” will be for you the signature also of our scientific intention’ (Kuyper 1880, 17). ‘Human life,’ he says, ‘forms an infinitely composite organism which can only exist in group fashion. Its parts can be called spheres which fit and turn together like the wheels of a machine. Each sphere is constituted by its own principle, its middle point holding it securely together.’ Here he pictured life as both a *unity*, ‘an unending conglomerate organism,’ and a *diversity*, each sphere ‘forming an area of its own with its own Sovereign, answering to its own law-of-life’ (1880, 11). In an entertainingly adroit passage written years later he points out the source(s) of unity:

Sovereign power is exercised in the home of your neighbor on the left and in the home of your neighbor on the right, and the unity of the two is found in the mayor of

your village. But next to that village lies another village, and the union of their sovereignties automatically points to the regional government. Yet your region, too, is surrounded by other regions, and the union of all these regions flows down from a single national government. . . . Next to your own country are other countries where sovereign authority is exercised, just as in yours. If you then look around on earth for the unifying point of all those lines, you will be hopelessly disappointed. So you must look higher, to a power to which all these countries are equally subservient! Now then, who else has power over all the nations of the earth but the Lord our God?

KUYPER 1907, Section 19

Although called for and anticipated in the world, real unity is derived from beyond itself. The realization of unity presupposes a higher power. Unity is always ultimately a gift. This was spelled out in Kuyper's [1869](#) lecture, 'Uniformity: the Curse of Modern Life.'

Although Kuyper says in his 1880 speech that there are as many spheres as there are 'constellations in the sky' (1880, 11) he actually lists the familiar, ethical, domestic, societal, natural, scientific, ecclesiastical, aesthetic, and state sphere. Each has its own principle and answers to its own life-law. He adds that in the sphere of nature, 'The Sovereign works upon matter through force according to fixed law' (ibid.). In the area of societal life there is a certain normative pressure people sense and can try to understand. The different spheres also work upon each other, 'giving rise to a rich, many-sided and diverse human life' (ibid.).

Sphere sovereignty involves establishing what constitutes or belongs to the *internal* affairs of a particular sphere and what does not. It involves recognizing the characteristic or qualifying function of each (candidate) sphere. A puzzling feature of life is that "things" fall under various jurisdictions. Although sovereignty may seem to imply something singular and absolute, totally exclusive, it does not – there are always other areas of authority, of sovereignty. Authority is distributed: there are many sovereign spheres.

In the case of the church Kuyper speaks of 'Her organization, that characteristic of its own self-sufficiency' ([1869a](#), 34). The purpose or organizing principle should identify what belongs in its own particular sphere and what remains outside of it. He also speaks of *a calling*, a characteristic task as defining a sphere. In practice he applied this to a thing, group, institution, organization, or office. He mentions 'the nature of its own unique life,' or 'life-principle' ([Kuyper 1869d](#)).

6 Analysis

Kuyper's view of the order of creation is not a static but a dynamic one involving a disclosure process. Numerous human societal responses can be given to one and the same creation ordinance or law. Each ordinance admits of many possible cultural *embodiments*. He talked about 'the unique form in which the idea is realized by different nations' (Kuyper [1873e](#)). Of his own political party he says, 'it wishes to develop . . . in accordance with the altered circumstances of our nation in a form that satisfies the needs of our time' (1907, Section 11). We are 'heirs of a political aspiration which . . . *if developed in accordance with our times* still has promise for the future' (1907, Section 9; my emphasis). Human society is a product of human action, but not exclusively. Determining if and to what extent a particular cultural response is a legitimate expression of the ordinances is a subtle process of evaluation in light of Scripture and historical experience. Although not a Natural Law theory, it bears some similarities to one. It does not aim at a *return* to an archetypal right way

things were done in the past but involves innovation: ‘We wish to recover nothing from the past that has proved unusable, nothing that we have outgrown or that no longer fits our circumstances’ (1907, Section 11).

In discussing how ordinances can be known Kuyper starts by saying that ‘in the area of study and business there is nothing else for us to do except to discover the laws and ordinances which God has placed there’ (1879, 31). He then cautions that ‘history can never be the touchstone of the principles, because history exemplifies a relative *application* of the principle, but never formulates the *principles themselves*; and even if this constitutes no objection, there is nothing in the application that offers us a guarantee against the corrupting and denaturing of the principles’ (ibid., 39 §23). Anything involving human formative activity will leave room for disputes (ibid., 48–49). ‘Now of course it would be easiest for us if God had been pleased to communicate all of these ordinances in clear statement. But he did not so will it and it behooves us to rest in that will’ (ibid., 49). Nevertheless, as to certain topics, he asks, ‘Does not a voice in your innermost self tell you that such . . . must run counter to God’s ordinances?’ (1891b, 201, 61). It is clear that he has a strong doctrine of conscience, ‘a voice in your innermost self,’ that can perform an important function. But ultimately, it is revelation from God that is decisive:

If there were no revelation, then we too would nevertheless have to come to terms with such a situation, and with resignation bear the consequences of sin as a divisive, obscuring and disruptive force in every area of human life ... [Yet] there is a Word of God, a word in the narrow sense of a special way he has revealed himself to us ... where, to a very important extent, the ordinances of God for our human lives are defined.

KUYPER 1879, 43 §29

To summarize: although limited, 1) you can figure out the peculiar task belonging to a sovereign life-sphere in part by observation and study; 2) you can listen to ‘a voice in your innermost self’ to discern what the norm is; and 3) God in Scripture has, ‘to a very important extent,’ revealed the ordinances pertaining to life-spheres.^z

Kuyper says that one task of (the sphere of) government is to prevent or resolve conflicts without failing to recognize its own limits:

As soon as there is any clash among the different spheres of life, where one sphere trespasses on or violates the domain that by divine ordinance belongs to the other, then it is the God-given duty of the government to uphold justice before arbitrariness ... What it may not do is to grant such assurance of justice to one sphere and withhold it from another.

[KUYPER 1891b](#)

In so far as the events or effects of one kind of sphere spills over and impacts those of another (detrimentally) it is obvious that they are or should be restricted by another. Yet violations of sphere sovereignty can occur often. People like to have things their own way, even when this causes breakdown and hardship for others. What goes on in the family, school, or business often does spill over and hinder the course of events in another sphere. This is why sphere sovereignty is a principle with an important task.

6.1 Civil Disobedience

Kuyper recognized that some situations call for “civil disobedience,” for opposing a government, a leader, or an authority that has taken the course of arbitrary action, established a pattern violating norms and law and trampling justice. In this regard he says,

What we oppose is “the revolution,” by which we mean the political and social system embodied in the French Revolution. We do not oppose every popular uprising. We recognize that national leaders are sometimes called to put an end to destructive tyrannies, and so we honor, for example, the Dutch Revolt against Spain, the Glorious Revolution under William III, the American war of independence from Britain, and our overthrow of the French regime in 1813. Those events, after all, do not represent destruction but restoration, not the overthrow of a nation’s laws but their reaffirmation, and thus not a forsaking of God but a return to Him. Not long after Kuyper’s death his followers were the core of the resistance in the Netherlands to the German Nazi assault on Europe, 196 of them alone killed by the Germans for organizing a free newspaper. The best of the survivors after the German collapse refused to be honored for their resistance.

KUYPER 1907, Section 5

“Sovereignty in [its] own sphere” signifies that the right to exercise authority in the case of any creature called human, is a delegated and an entrusted authority. In other words, it is never original, or if you will, it can never originate from the will of any human being nor from the will of any number of human beings together; rather it only had and has its source in the unlimited free and original authority and sovereignty of God.

KUYPER 1879, 477

The principle of sphere sovereignty offers a respectful and realistic antidote to the post-modern trend of unconditional acceptance of culture without boundaries or limits except for the penchant to reject all limits. The order that sphere sovereignty outlines is meant to be an acknowledgement of the tangible rule of God bearing on societal reality inch by inch today.⁸

7 Conclusion

In this essay we have followed the path along which Kuyper formulated the principle of distributed authority, or sphere sovereignty. It was a long process of struggle. Its prototype, “independence in its own sphere,” was derived by Groen through his historical reflections on the (Dutch) Reformation, and tireless years as statesman. Kuyper’s mature principle offers a way of recognizing societal structures that have domain-limited and area-specific autonomy. By taking the sovereignty of God as the center of existence, Kuyper acknowledged human obedience to God as the core practical good – in contrast to temporal human happiness. Sphere sovereignty represents a will and a way to obey God and His ordinances for life. It is a diversity principle in so far as it recognizes multiple relatively autonomous centers of authority, not just one or a few – and a unity principle in so far as it recognizes the importance of the symbiotic interdependence of multiple spheres. Kuyper’s early conversion to Christ and second conversion to Calvinism gave him a philosophical-theological unity-loving principle of coherent diversity that guided him throughout his carrier.⁹

The distribution of authority was not a theoretical problem for Kuyper, and his solution was not theoretical. It was born out of a long, hard, and (for some people) painful struggle to gain recognition of the freedom of the church, the school, the family to govern themselves and make decisions regarding their own internal affairs. Kuyper’s mission was to make room for the different circles to function independently and yet symbiotically together – each within its own boundaries. Human creaturely existence only reaches its destination, he believed, when people

and things can freely *unfold* in accordance with the norms and ordinances pertaining to them as intuited or understood by people. He wanted to protect spheres (people and institutions) from state, church, or business interference and control. He was concerned that no unrightful power should interfere in the *life* which *God gives* to people and societies within different spheres, institutions, and contexts: ‘He determined laws and ordinances ... for their flesh and blood, also for their hearts and minds, for their tastes and feelings, for their ethical and religious development’ (Kuyper 1879, 28). The ultimate goal of the principle was to protect and facilitate people (and institutions) to live according to their best lights, which should be unfolded uniquely and yet as much as possible in accordance with the divine ordinances given by Christ the Sovereign Lord.

8 Epilogue

Sphere sovereignty played a major role in the development of the philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd. In a long letter involving an early job application, Dooyeweerd formulated a detailed “work program,” a key part of which was to ‘build on the new foundations in the light of the Calvinist doctrine of sovereignty’ ([Dooyeweerd 1922](#), 50). He says the “problem of sovereignty” is of paramount importance and should be dealt with extensively. After his appointment Dooyeweerd made “The Calvinistic Principle of Sphere Sovereignty as a Political Principle” the subject of a major paper ([1924](#)). He says much later that ‘Kuyper’s conception had a directive significance for his reformational philosophy. The importance of that directive significance can hardly be overrated. For Kuyper had given his conception of sphere sovereignty profound biblically religious anchorage ...’ ([Dooyeweerd 1973](#), 8). The principle provided the outline of at least one basic story or level of Dooyeweerd’s philosophy. Like Kuyper Dooyeweerd was involved in Dutch politics. He was a professor of law and jurisprudence. He distinguished himself as an opposer of Nazi ideology before Hitler rose to power in democratic elections in neighboring Germany. He was criticized for that in the national magazine for philosophy. Yet this warning proved a clear demonstration of the validity of the view that all power is designated by and subject to God’s ordinances.

Kuyper’s influence is popularly indicated by his nickname “the helmsman of the little people”. It is a proven fact that he inspired the emancipation of some 20 % of the Dutch people, mostly poor people. His influence is still felt in Dutch society, more especially at times of difficulty. The prolific Catholic bishop Muskens, who studied him, called him the only real leader of the Netherlands after William of Orange. He was quoted in a 2020 Coronavirus press conference by the government.

Being true to the thought discussed in this essay, it must be emphasized that it occurred in a specific space and time. And also, Kuyper was by no means without faults himself. Yet, the core principle of delegated authority is a boundless source of individual freedom and human rights.

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1 In this article the English translations from the original Dutch texts are my own.

2 ‘As such, some kind of natural knowledge of God remains at work in the people and the noblemen, and a moral law speaks within conscience, and there is a general sense of what is harmful and what safeguards virtue, but regardless of how highly these assistants of justice can be appreciated, they do not lead to a right knowledge of God’s higher ordinances. This remains clear enough even from history of the most extraordinary peoples of antiquity and also from the grave plight of the situation of human life in China, Thailand and Baluchistan’ (Kuyper 1879, 48–49).

3 Published in May 1874 (Kuyper 1874, 282). This is also the first time Kuyper used the term “Calvinism” in the title of a treatise – soon to be followed by others ([Kuyper 1888](#); [1891a](#); [1898](#)).

4 Kuyper took his title word for word from one sentence he found in an article written by Groen. In their further correspondence Groen registers no objection to the term “sovereignty” or the new phrase and he certainly agreed with its basis idea ([Goslinga 1937](#), 291, 293, 420). In this outline, we surprisingly find a name and reference to ‘the pure line of sovereignty in [its] own sphere (Languet)’ ([Goslinga 1937](#), 291); surprising, since what in his own address Kuyper attributed to Groen, in this outline he attributes to Hubert Languet (1518–1581) the French Huguenot,

presumed author of *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos sive de Principis in populum, populi in principem legitima potestate* (*Defenses [of liberty] against tyrants...*). Years later Kuyper again attributes the phrase to Groen in his opening speech to the Vrije Universiteit, bearing the significant title *Souvereiniteit in Eigen Kring* (*Sphere Sovereignty*), in 1880. On that momentous occasion he seems to have wanted to recognize Groen's contribution to his understanding of this principle, and honor the memory of the great Anti-Revolutionary leader Groen, who had died on the 19th of May 1876. Kuyper argues that it is a creational and not merely a cultural-historical principle ([Kuyper 1876](#)).

5 Another sixteenth century Reformer who helped formulate these views was Theodore Beza, the associate of John Calvin. Kuyper called him 'the transitional figure between Genevan and Huguenot Calvinism, who in order to see to it that the sovereignty delegated by God on earth not be misused, desired that parliaments, class groups, and local magistrates exercise *sovereignty in [their] own sphere*' (Kuyper 1874, 46).

6 In his *Ons Program*, Kuyper gave the lexicographical background of the term "ordinances" and various Bible passages where the word appears (Kuyper 1879, Chapter 3, 46 §23).

7 Kuyper 1879, 39 §23: 'It is my conviction that knowledge of these principles, of a pure or full kind, can nowhere be gained except from a study of God's Word and research into God's ordinances. The standards that others have used to test what is correct and incorrect are unsatisfactory, and as far as I can judge, neither *history, legal studies*, nor *thesystems of philosophers* have a reliable point of departure to offer for knowledge of the true, virtuous, eternal *legal principles*. Not in *history!* Because even though we gladly agree that in morals, manners, habits and customs, a national *awareness of justice* is expressed – and every piece of legislation that fails to take past history into account will be baseless – hence, history can never be the touchstone of the principles, because they exemplify a relative *application* of the principle, but never formulate the *principles themselves*; and even if this constitutes no objection, there is nothing in the application that offers us a guarantee against the corrupting and denaturing of the principles.'

8 'What we combat, on principle and without compromise, is the attempt to totally change how men think and how they live, to change his head and his heart, his home and his country – to create a state of affairs the very opposite of what has always been believed, cherished and confessed, and so to lead us to a complete emancipation from the sovereign claims of almighty God. The French Revolution was the first and most brazen attempt of this kind ... Whoever respects the rights of history places himself under a law and acknowledges that his will is bound to that of former generations and to the interests of generations to come. In short... we kneel alongside our forefathers and our present supporters in order to give glory, not to the creature, who is nothing, but to Him whose holy footsteps you hear rustling through the pages of history' (Kuyper 1907, Section 5).

9 Kuyper's philosophical orientation is already discernable in his [1869](#) 'Uniformity: The Curse of Modern Life.' For his conversion process see my 'How Abraham Kuyper became a Kuyperian,' 1992, also in Kuyper 2011, and again in [Bishop & Kok 2013](#).

10 This was cited in [Henderson 1994](#), note 133.

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Published in May 1874 (Kuyper 1874, 282). This is also the first time Kuyper used the term “Calvinism” in the title of a treatise – soon to be followed by others (Kuyper 1888; 1891a; 1898).

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Kuyper 1879, 39 §23: ‘It is my conviction that knowledge of these principles, of a pure or full kind, can nowhere be gained except from a study of God’s Word and research into God’s ordinances. The standards that others have used to test what is correct and incorrect are unsatisfactory, and as far as I can judge, neither history, legal studies, nor the systems of philosophers have a reliable point of departure to offer for knowledge of the true, virtuous, eternal legal principles. Not in history! Because even though we gladly agree that in morals, manners, habits and customs, a national awareness of justice is expressed – and every piece of legislation that fails to take past history into account will be baseless – hence, history can never be the touchstone of the principles, because they exemplify a relative application of the principle, but never formulate the principles themselves; and even if this constitutes no objection, there is nothing in the application that offers us a guarantee against the corrupting and denaturing of the principles.’

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This was cited in Henderson 1994, note 133