

Authority abused

In times of apparent threat, the old claims of authority appear to be the best hedge against disorder. Be careful, says the author; we may be invoking the wrong kind of authority against a false threat.

by Bob Goudzwaard

As long as the gospel has been preached and as long as human beings have accepted that gospel as message of a real salvation, so long as the gospel borne a political relevance. As one theologian has pointed out, on the day of Christ's resurrection, his disciples were gathering in a house with the doors closed because they feared the Jews. Though they did not intend to unfold a political will, their enemies regarded the gathering of the little group as a political fact which had to be eliminated. The acceptance of the gospel is no doubt an important personal fact, but it is also from the outset an important social and political fact.

The political relevance of the gospel is, however, not only a question of its external impact. It also implies an internal renewal of the political realm. Its message is not limited to the salvation of the soul, but also reaches the body; its promise is not only a new heaven, but also a new earth.

Renewing political thought from a christian point of view has involved, as we all know, several generations. Throughout the long history of these discussions the idea of sphere sovereignty has emerged, a kind of echo in political thought of a deep scriptural truth. Namely, that we have to obey God above men and that, therefore, no human institution is entitled to lay a total claim on our lives. We find the kernel of that idea as the time of the Reformation of Calvin's statements about the civil state. But it is not until the middle of the nineteenth century that the German politician von Gerlach and the Dutch christian political leaders, Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper, give it a concrete formulation.

We, however, are living in the year of the Lord 1976. And in our times, the field of political activity has reached a degree of complexity that Groen and Kuyper could not have imagined in their days. Furthermore, everything seems to be political today, for political life and the other spheres of life have grown increasingly intertwined. Especially in socioeconomic life, government and business have greatly influenced one another; and the state has frequently accepted many economic responsibilities. Since the government interferes deeply in social and economic affairs, the question arises: have the developments of our time not made the whole idea of sphere sovereignty obsolete, especially in social and economic life? Is there any point in speaking about separate spheres and about separate authorities which have to be respected in their own "sphere," whatever that may be? Today, no one pays much attention to the principle of sphere sovereignty except those convinced apostles of free enterprise who want to curse any government interference.

The principle of sphere sovereignty has become a sacred traffic island for those Christians who cannot keep pace with the high speed on the freeways of our civilization. It looks like a principle designed for the self-interests of those people who interpret labourers' demands for codetermination as a violation of the God-given authority of the entrepreneur. So in our days, we are inclined to dismiss this principle as thoroughly bankrupt even though it once was one of the earmarks of christian political thought.

If it is true that the principle was originally a good one, how can it have become obsolete and outmoded by the development of time? A good principle will hold true at any time, not just when the circumstances allow it. If that is correct, there is only one other possibility: we ourselves have by our interpretations made this principle an obsolete and dead rule of behaviour. I should like to draw your attention to three common misinterpretations of the principle of sphere sovereignty. The first misinterpretation has made this norm-oriented principle into an authority-oriented one.

The second has changed the principle from a dynamic calling into a static barrier. And the third has, in a one-sided way, adopted this principle as the one for guiding relationships between government and business enterprise. In other words, I want to present the principle of sphere sovereignty in its original meaning as a norm-oriented principle, which is an expression of the dynamic calling of government and business enterprise in their mutual relationships. I am opposing its present interpretation as a static rule, which demands of the government a one-sided respect for all existing authorities and their methods in the economic sphere of life.

Carte blanche authority

First, I said the current interpretation of the principle of sphere sovereignty is authority-oriented. For instance, this principle is customarily used to command full respect for the sole authority of the entrepreneur in his firm or of the business enterprise in economic life. According to this interpretation, the businessman's authorities and competencies should be respected in all cases. Now, respect for authority may be a good thing; in its proper setting it is even a biblical demand. And it is also true that the principle of sphere sovereignty has a lot to do with the different competencies in human life. But is this respect for every human authority the kernel, the very heart of the principle of sphere sovereignty? I do not believe it is.

The expression "sphere sovereignty" is not a literal translation of the Dutch expression "*soevereiniteit in eigen kring*," as it was used by Kuyper and Groen. "Kring" means a circle, and the peculiar characteristic of every circle is that it cannot exist without a centre. However, Kuyper and Groen do not claim that the centre is human authority, God-given; nor do they claim that it is the vital source from which each life sphere draws its life and finds its inner coherence. Although admittedly Kuyper seems to suggest that, the center of each circle, the source of coherence of each sphere is not human authority but the autonomous divine norms. That was Groen's point when he spoke of the validity of God's law in each sphere of life. He also quoted von Gerlach to the effect that God's authority is the centre of every life sphere; as soon as that authority is no longer recognised, the different spheres lose their inner coherence and unity.

The distinction may appear to be minor, especially in relation to the problems we face in modern social and economic policy. It is not. I give one illustration: if we face the issue of labour unrest, say in business enterprise, and we follow the authority-interpretation of the principle of sphere sovereignty, then we view every effort to achieve co-determination for the workers as a violation of a God-given authority. Therefore, we reject these efforts as an attack on the exclusive sovereignty of the business enterprise. If, however, God's norms for economic life form the base of the enterprise's sovereignty, then that principle may well lead us to strive for the coresponsibility of labourers in industry.

If stewardship is God's norm for all economic life (and it is), then every enterprise is called to grow into a real institution of stewardship. And that is a calling in which all the workers have to share, according to their own vocation.

I conclude, therefore, that from a christian point of view human authority may never be seen as something to be respected as a goal in itself, regardless of the forms it takes on. The principle of sphere sovereignty demands that it start from God's norms in understanding the limits of human authority, instead of starting from any human authority and making it into an unlimited norm to judge all human behaviour.

A static barrier

Secondly, the principle of sphere sovereignty has been changed from a dynamic calling into a static boundary, a line of defence against all governmental interference. That is the primary political result once the principle of sphere sovereignty has been interpreted as autonomous authority. Those who follow this line of reasoning view every governmental measure that affects the market and the business enterprise as an attack on the sphere sovereignty of the business enterprise. But can we draw this same conclusion if we start from the confession that God gave his norms also for social and economic life and that their authority has to be respected?

The question is almost rhetorical, for it is true that the central norm for every government is to do justice in all public affairs, and if it is true too that no production-household can do away with God's commandment to behave in a stewardly way, then it becomes a task of governmental justice to call back to its original vocation those business enterprises that do not fulfill their calling. In fact, extensive government intervention in social and economic life may become a necessity. It is, for instance, a matter of public justice that enterprises do not pollute our environment heavily; therefore legislation to this end does not violate the principle of sphere sovereignty. Rather, the principle demands such legislation so that the government may bring justice in society on the basis of a deep respect for the sovereign norm of economic life - stewardship. For stewardship includes a direct concern of every form for its own natural surroundings. If a government hurries irresponsible firms back to their vocation, that is an expression of its honour for the sphere sovereignty of the business enterprise.

Clearly the principle of sphere sovereignty does not work like a static barrier, but urges us to a dynamic interpretation of the calling of government in business enterprise. Under the continuous influence of a flat, materialistic lifestyle, however, production-households often miss the human dimension in shaping working conditions; they also neglect their calling to stewardly living in relation to their consumers, their labourers, and the well-being of the environment. Instead, they are often nothing more than working-places to organize the so-called factors of production to spew out the greatest possible number of consumer goods. That is hardly the way to meet God's norms for economic life - the need to show careful concern for our neighbours, to cooperate in our work out of respect for the image of God in every human being, to serve real human needs, and to guard the life possibilities of future generations, animals, fishes, and birds. As long as the business enterprise is not opened up to these norms for its own sphere of life, so long too a government has to respect these norms for economic life by correcting the public abuses of private enterprise. The government even has to create the public conditions to stimulate every firm to open itself to a real obedience to these norms of stewardship. For a government functioning today it is a dynamic calling to promote in its own way - the way of justice - the sphere sovereignty of the business enterprise by orienting it to responsible behaviour toward nature, human beings, scarce resources, and society as a whole.

Violating the state

The third common misunderstanding of the principle of sphere sovereignty suggests that it is supposed to work only in one direction, protecting the private sector from the public sector. On the other hand, is it possible to turn that interpretation around and to speak about preserving the sphere sovereignty of the state against pressures from individuals and groups in society? However, that seems appropriate only in times of bitter revolution, and we are far from that point in our rich western world.

In sorting out these questions, I would stress that sphere sovereignty is a norm-oriented principle. The state is not a goal in itself. The government has the God-given duty to obey the norm of justice in all public affairs. But that implies that it should also have the possibility of acting concretely and reacting according to that norm. If a government is prevented from dealing with society in the interest of justice, this is a direct violation of the sphere sovereignty of the state. Yet that is precisely what happens when pressure groups try to make governmental power an extension of their own private interest. It is also what happens when a president is shaped into a commercial product to be bought by the nation. And, again we have seen this happen in the rise in our day of a state that no longer functions for the sake of justice, but relies instead on endless compromises. Meanwhile the economically strong divide the booty among themselves while the weak and the small watch from the sidelines. This is a bitter violation of the sovereignty of God's norms for all public behaviour, for the central demand for each government is to protect the weak and to defend those who have no power.

A totalitarian state is indeed demonic because it openly ignores God's norms for family life, for economic life, for social life. In all these spheres of life people are living directly before the face of the living God, who is the only one entitled to lay total claim to our lives. A state that tries to make that total claim is utterly demonic. But the real danger of totalitarianism does not come just from the side of the state. This same danger can arise from the side of so-called free enterprise, which systematically tries to make the government an extension of private commercial interests, and which continuously tries to transform the family into a dumping ground for endless streams of consumer goods.

How can government and family life survive and develop in a society where the growth of wealth and power is the only horizon of happiness? All these institutions will be transformed in the end to serve that central goal of growth; at the same time they will lose almost all their distinctive characteristics.

For where norms lose their authority in the separate spheres of life, every sphere's sovereignty collapses. We can be overwhelmed by a totalitarian society, but we are also able to create it. Even more important than the principle from which we say we start is the way in which we actually interpret it. In spite of the misinterpretations that have become so common in our day, in its biblical root, the principle of sphere sovereignty is not only valid, but has become critically important in our culture, which has become flattened, materialistic, and virtually subject to the totalitarian rule of the economic over our lives.

Bob Goudzwaard is professor of political economy at the Free University in Amsterdam and a former member of the Dutch parliament.