

Christianity and Politics

A Reformational Perspective¹

Chris Gousmett

¹ The contents of this study were first presented in 1991 as a series of lectures at Knox Theological Hall under the auspices of the Faculty of Theology, University of Otago, for a degree course in systematic theology. While some of the references to the political situation in New Zealand have become somewhat dated, the basic policies followed have not changed and the analysis and critique offered here would not be any different today [1999]. The material has thus not been revised apart from minor stylistic changes and a few additional footnotes.

Contents

Introduction.....	3
1. Christianity and Politics.....	5
Introduction.....	5
Johannes Althusius.....	7
Abraham Kuyper.....	8
Herman Dooyeweerd.....	10
2. The Neo-Calvinist articulation of a Christian World-view.....	15
Religion.....	16
Creation.....	18
The cultural mandate.....	20
The Fall.....	20
Redemption.....	22
Eschaton.....	23
3. Sphere sovereignty as a theory of society.....	24
Kuyper in opposition to the Constantinian model.....	24
Rule of the strongest.....	25
Differentiation and disclosure of society.....	25
An example from New Zealand.....	27
Neo-Calvinist view of the church.....	30
The responsibility of the state.....	30
Justice according to the Neo-Calvinist theory.....	31
4. The nature of justice and human rights.....	33
Human rights – origin and theories.....	33
John Locke.....	35
No definition of justice.....	35
The Scriptural view of rights.....	36
Human rights and justice not human conventions.....	39
The problem of political rights and issues.....	40
A Christian view on rights and justice.....	41
Herman Dooyeweerd and G C Berkouwer.....	42
5. The task of the institutional church in relation to the state.....	45
Sovereignty of church and state.....	45
The neo-Calvinist concept.....	46
The task of the church in relation to the state.....	47
The Scriptures and political life.....	49
Justice and the Word of God.....	50
The task of the institutional church.....	52
Concluding remarks.....	52
Bibliography.....	54

Introduction

These chapters take their starting-point in a book by Nicholas Wolterstorff, **Until Justice and Peace Embrace**,² which deals with the neo-Calvinist vision of Abraham Kuyper and his spiritual heirs, giving a critique of Liberation Theology on the one hand, and world Capitalism on the other, from the perspective of a radical Calvinist position.

Wolterstorff says that his lectures arise from confronting a paradox of his own upbringing in a conservative Calvinist tradition, where the rather passive piety and theology was in stark contrast to the radical social vision which lay at the roots of that tradition. He cites Michael Walzer's comment, "the Calvinist saint is the first of those self-disciplined agents of social and political reconstruction who have appeared so frequently in modern history."³ Wolterstorff set out to rediscover this radicalism, and to explore the reasons why Calvinists today have lost the initiative in social and political reconstruction.

The roots of this radical Calvinism are found in the thought of Abraham Kuyper, who held that Calvinism is not primarily a theological system but a world-view, and to see Calvinism solely or primarily as a theological system is to destroy its inherent genius, that is, the recognition that theology is not an end in itself but a servant of the social life of humankind.

Calvinism as part of the Protestant Reformation rejected the mediaeval ideal of faith as the contemplation of God, and instead posited the ideal of faith as obedience to God. Calvin's **Institutes** commences with the discussion of the knowledge of God, which he states is the appropriate response to God's works, rather than contemplation of God's essence. That is, gratitude for God's gifts and obedience to his laws, rather than contemplation, is the heart of Christianity. It is unfortunate that from the context of 20th century society, Calvinism appears to be legalistic and lacking in warmth of piety, as well as concern for the betterment of humankind as a whole. I would contend that this is in fact a distortion of Calvinism, and that that legalism arises from failing to see that the core of obedience to God in Calvin's works is gratitude for God's blessings. To make obedience the be-all and end-all of Calvinist thought is to miss its central thrust, but unfortunately that is how Calvinism is often portrayed today by both its supporters and its detractors. Calvin's view was in fact a response to the prevailing contemplative piety of his day, a view in which obedience and social responsibility are obscured.

Wolterstorff stresses that Calvinism is the repudiation of other-worldly or world-flight Christianity and the affirmation of world-formative Christianity. Both recognise the presence of that which is inferior or evil in human society, the difference being that other-worldly Christianity turns away from this world to seek something better outside of it, while world-formative Christianity seeks to transform society to better it. This affirmation of world-formative Christianity was in fact the recovery of the original thrust

² Nicholas Wolterstorff. **Until justice and peace embrace**. Grand Rapids: 1983.

³ Michael Walzer. **The revolution of the saints: a study in the origins of radical politics**. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965, p. vii.

of Christianity which brought about profound social and political change in the Roman Empire, not by a process of revolution but by disseminating a new consciousness, a new way of looking at things. This socially transformative thrust of Christianity became submerged under the other-worldly piety of the Mediaeval period, although it was never entirely absent, and it was only gradually and partially recovered in the Reformation. It is perhaps in the further reforming work in the line of Abraham Kuyper that we find the true genius of Calvinism coming to its fullest expression. In these lectures we will be exploring that socially-transformative vision of Kuyper and his followers, and exploring how it can revitalise our social vision today.

1. Christianity and Politics

Introduction

From the end of the 18th century through the first half of the 19th century, Europe was in political turmoil. The French Revolution had overthrown the established order in France, and the Napoleonic Wars had spread this revolutionary ideology across Europe. The Napoleonic Code, a legal system rooted in the principles of the French Revolution, had been established in the countries under the control of Napoleon's Empire, thus introducing such principles into the life of those nations.

This revolutionary ideology had as its basic principle "No God, No Master," a principle rooted in the humanistic philosophy of the Enlightenment, which held that we should accept no law other than that which we wish to impose upon ourselves, and that the source of political power lay in the will of the people. The concept of external authority was discarded. This principle became firmly embedded in the political consciousness of Europe, both through popular dissemination and through the imposition of the Napoleonic Empire. These ideas retained their currency even after Napoleon was defeated and deposed, and sovereignty returned to the nations he had ruled.

In this context of radical politics rooted in an atheistic ideology, there was a revival of evangelical Christianity, a movement called the Reveil, which influenced churches in Switzerland, France, and the Netherlands (at that time this included Belgium, which gained its independence in 1830). This revival was associated with such figures as Merle D'Aubigne, the famous church historian in Switzerland, Cesar Malan in France, and Willem Bilderdijk and Isaac da Costa in the Netherlands.⁴ John T McNeill compares Bilderdijk with Kierkegaard in his contempt for government-controlled Christianity softened by indifference. Isaac da Costa was a converted Portuguese Jew who wrote poetry attacking the liberalism and ethical decay of the times.

Under the influence of these men, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, who served as Cabinet Secretary for the King and as a member of Parliament, was converted from an ethical view of Christianity to evangelical faith. Groen was a prominent historian whose work on the history of the Netherlands is still important today. His views on the significance of the gospel and of its fortunes through history were shaped by the thought of Merle D'Aubigne, the prominent reformation historian whose pastoral ministry had a profound effect on Groen, and through whom the Reveil was fostered in the Netherlands.

One of the effects of this Reveil in the Netherlands which we will be considering in this block of lectures, was the revival of Calvinistic thought, and in particular its outworking in the political arena. This revival of Calvinism was not simply a return to the 16th century, but a contemporary application of the insights and principles of Calvinism to the issues of the day, as well as criticism, correction and expansion of various aspects of the

⁴ See John Westerdorp. "The Dutch revival and its theology." *Vox Reformata* 25 (1975) 17-25.

thought of Calvin and his spiritual heirs. For instance, Abraham Kuyper rejected Calvin's conception of the church as an institution imposed on humankind from above, in preference to Jan Laski's conception of the church as a free fellowship originating in the religious life of Christians. This was the essence of his doctoral thesis, which compared the conceptions of Calvin and Jan Laski concerning the nature of the church.⁵ Since this tradition incorporates ideas and developments which are not found in the prior Calvinist tradition, it is usually referred to by the name of neo-Calvinism or alternatively in its 20th century form, Reformational Christianity.

The political thought of Abraham Kuyper and his spiritual heirs is the focus of these lectures, although as we will see, it cannot be divorced from the context of the revival of Calvinist thought and the development of a distinctive approach to Christianity. The most distinctive aspect of that approach is the idea that Christianity is world-transformative. The structure of society is not simply a static given or an arbitrary and ungrounded system, rather, it is the consequence of the unfolding and development by human beings of what God established in the beginning. That unfolding and development has been subject to two contrasting and opposing forces: human sin and divine grace. That is, in Augustine's terms, the formation of human society is the arena of conflict between the city of this world and the city of God. Nothing is a pure expression of either sin or grace, but these are mixed in varying proportions in all of human society. The task of the Christian then is to work to see the grace of God shape our society and overcome the effects of human sin. Redemption therefore is not simply personal but comprehensive: it restores all that has been distorted and abused by humankind, whether persons, or social structures, or systems of thought.

The structure of society is the result of human decision, whether obedient or disobedient to God, and thus it can be altered, and indeed should be altered, as it is a fallen structure in need of reform. Once we think of social structures as corrupted and in need of reformation, then it becomes impossible to think of the social order as ordained by God (in that form) and thus we become responsible for its structure. This view comes to expression in the Calvinist concept of "calling." While the Mediaeval Christian assumed that his or her calling served the common good if it was devotedly carried out, the Calvinist Christian was called to ensure that this calling served the common good, and to reform it if it did not. Calvin said that we must see that a trade or craft must serve the common good, benefiting our neighbours.⁶ This struggle for the reform of society is one facet of Christian discipleship: it is not in addition to piety, it is an essential part of piety, without which Christianity is a truncated and falsified version of the message of Christ. In a nutshell, Christianity is world-formative not world-fleeing. This was the vision which shaped and guided Kuyper in his career, a vision which lies at the roots of Calvinism. Ernst Troeltsch describes original Calvinism as

a systematic endeavour to mould the life of society as a whole, to a kind of "Christian Socialism" ... it lays down the principle that the Church ought to

⁵ See Henry Zwaanstra. "Abraham Kuyper's conception of the church." *Calvin Theological Journal* 9 (1974) 153-154.

⁶ John Calvin. *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973, p. 457 (on Ephesians 4:26-28).

be interested in all sides of life, and it neither isolates the religious element over against the other elements, like Lutheranism, nor does it permit this sense of collective responsibility to express itself merely in particular institutions and occasional intervention in affairs, as in Catholicism.⁷

However, the Calvinist reformation soon lost sight of its world-formative vision. While the Puritans in England and North America continued something of that vision for a time, on the Continent Calvinism became largely a scholastic theological system. It was only with the revival of Calvinism in the 19th century associated with the work of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck that Calvinists recovered an interest in issues that extended well beyond theology. Bavinck will not feature much in these lectures as his work on political issues was not as significant as that of Kuyper.⁸ His non-theological interests developed in other directions, notably the philosophy of education and the philosophy of science. However, Bavinck was important for his co-operation in the development and propagation of the Calvinist worldview which undergirded the work of Kuyper. For a good understanding of the theological articulation of that Calvinism, his book **Our Reasonable Faith**, which is a popular summary of his Reformed Dogmatics, is a good source and full of stimulating insights relevant even today.

Johannes Althusius

The most important contribution to Calvinist political thought between the time of the reformation and the rise of neo-Calvinism was perhaps that of the German jurist Johannes Althusius (1557-1638),⁹ who broke out of the universalistic Aristotelian conception of the state and denied that the individuals and institutions in society form parts of the state. Instead he examined the internal structural principles of society, which he came to realise varied according to the nature of the particular social relationships concerned. This was the first modern articulation of the principle of sphere-sovereignty, an important concept we will be examining in detail in another lecture. Althusius also recognised that Christian faith cannot be relegated to the supernatural or ecclesiastical arena, and instead sought to find God's order for the creation,¹⁰ including human social life, and not the order which the church sought to impose on it. On this basis he differentiated politics from theology. This was not, however, a secularisation of politics, as some interpreters have understood Althusius, but a recognition that God's sovereignty extends to every area of society which is to be guided by Scripture. The church is not that divine authority, and does not have a monopoly on the Scriptures or a privileged position in interpreting them. This was a rejection of the scholastic view that human social life is located in the arena of nature, which can receive God's grace only through the mediation of the "supernatural" church

⁷ Ernst Troeltsch. **The social teaching of the Christian churches**. New York: Macmillan, 1931, p. 602.

⁸ However, see Hillie J van der Streek. "Kuyper's legacy and multi-culturalism: Gender in his conception of democracy and sphere sovereignty." *Pro Rege* 27 (1998) 1: 16-24, where she discusses a dispute between Kuyper and Bavinck over women's suffrage, a dispute the Anti-Revolutionary Party did not resolve until 1953, eventually taking Bavinck's position rather than Kuyper's.

⁹ For details of Althusius' thought see James W Skillen. "The political theory of Johannes Althusius." *Philosophia Reformata* 39 (1974) 170-190.

¹⁰ Dismissed as "nature" by scholasticism.

institution. Althusius recognised that God's grace is given directly to human life, not through one particular institution of human life. The Scriptures are thus as important for understanding political life, which has a non-ecclesiastical, non-theological character, as they are for the life of the church and the development of theology. Thus Althusius saw that political life needs to be set free from the domination of the church to find its own proper sphere of authority and responsibility as God ordained for it, a radically Biblical insight which was taken up and developed by Kuyper.

Abraham Kuyper

Abraham Kuyper, the “founding father” of neo-Calvinism, was born in 1837 and died in 1920. He was a man of prodigious talents and accomplishments, who in his lifetime served as pastor, theological professor, church reformer, university founder, editor of both a daily and weekly Christian newspaper, author of numerous books and articles, member of parliament and Prime Minister. Many of these offices he filled at the same time, and the mark he has left on the political and social structure of Holland is immense. His influence extended far beyond Holland in his own time, and even today is of world significance, due to the influence of his thought and writings.

In 1879 Kuyper organised the “Voters’ Clubs” of the anti-revolutionary movement founded by Groen van Prinsterer into the Anti-Revolutionary Party.¹¹ The principles of this party were first given expression in the works of Groen, who stated the thesis that the principle of revolution was sinful and in opposition to the sovereignty of God in human society. The consequences of working out the principles of revolutionary ideology were shown by him to be destructive and in direct opposition to the Gospel, and thus he denounced the root from which this fruit grew. He rejected the idea that political sovereignty came from the will of the people, and asserted instead that it came from the sovereignty of God. All political life then was subject to a higher authority than that found within human society.

Kuyper’s view of the French Revolution

Kuyper also saw the French Revolution as the outcome of the Deism of the 18th century, and the denial of God and rejection of all authority other than that which comes from the people. Kuyper saw this as the setting aside of God and the deification of humankind. It stood for the denial of the wisdom of the past and a break with tradition, so that everyone was to be his own lord and master, guided only by his own will and pleasure. In opposition to the principles of the French Revolution, Kuyper placed the Calvinist view of the sovereignty of God as the source of all human authority.

Kuyper saw the French Revolution as much more than a political event. He saw it as the watershed change in the Western view of humankind itself, which propagated the idea of political and social autonomy. These principles were found in slightly modified form in liberalism and socialism, political views which Kuyper found abhorrent, while the conservative reactionary stance towards revolutionary principles was also repudiated by

¹¹ It has been suggested that this was the first modern European political party.

Kuyper. He saw that nothing less than a reform of political and social life under the sovereignty of God could counteract the destructive force of revolutionary ideology.

Kuyper was not, however, opposed to revolution as such, but to the usurpation of power which a revolution can bring and the ideology which undergirded the revolutionary movements of the 18th and 19th centuries. A proper revolution is one which is led by the responsible leaders of a government with the support of the nation as a whole, in order to resist the tyranny of the ruler. Kuyper supported Calvin's view [*Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.20.2.23-25] that if a nation is oppressed by its rightful ruler, it is entitled to offer resistance until proper government is restored. This is not the same as the revolution experienced in France, which had as its aim the overthrow of the structures of power to establish a totally new authority, but instead it was a desire to restore the life of the nation which has been corrupted and abused by the tyrant. It is a correction of what has been damaged rather than a replacement for what has been abolished. Kuyper was thus opposed to a revolution which rejects proper authority and establishes in its place the principle of "no God, no master."

The practical consequences of the French Revolution Kuyper saw as the absolutisation of the state, and the resulting irreligious character it develops. Such an absolutisation of the state can only lead to a rejection of the authority of God, since the state posits no limits for itself beyond what it wishes to accept. The state therefore encroaches on all other social activity so that all other interests suffer under the domination of the state. It is interesting that Kuyper saw as the prime example of this tendency not France but the United States of America, where the state has absorbed the sovereignty that is rightfully God's.¹²

Kuyper's view of the State

Kuyper was not opposed to the existence of the state, since it serves the purposes of God: the maintenance of order. He opposed the Aristotelian view, which is found in Thomas Aquinas, that the state was "natural" and originally essential for human fulfilment,¹³ and instead based his view on Augustine, who held that the state was established as a result of human sin, to restrain and punish human wrong-doing. This does not mean that Kuyper thought the state is in itself evil or inherently sinful. He held that the state was God's good gift to humankind, which is a blessing in view of sin. But Kuyper held that there would have been no need for the state if humankind had not sinned. The formation of the state and the exercise of force to ensure order in society is in his view something unnatural. The state is only a help against the forces of human lawlessness and social disintegration. Kuyper saw the existence of numerous states as the result of the fragmentation of the unity given in creation. The divisions in human society are partially recovered through civil government as a result of God's grace.

¹² J M van der Kroef. "Abraham Kuyper and the rise of neo-Calvinism in the Netherlands." *Church History* 17 (1984) 329.

¹³ Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica* 1a 96 4.

As a result, Kuyper refused to see the source of salvation in human life as either the abolition of the state as a hindrance to human fulfilment and freedom, or alternatively the strengthening of the state to impose yet more order. Kuyper held that the state both restrains anarchy and provides for positive development of human society as a result of God's grace. The recognition of this state of affairs has brought with it an acknowledgment of God's sovereignty over human life, since the establishment of human authority brought awareness of a higher power in which that authority is ultimately based.

However, we can see in Kuyper's views the legacy of nature-grace dualism. To see the task of the state as the restraining of human sin, with only a limited ability to restore human community, means that there is little which God's grace brings which is not already present in the created nature of humanity, such as forcible restraint of wrongdoing. To see the state as ordained on account of sin is to obscure the recognition of the positive task of the state as a public, civil order exercised under God's sovereignty and provided for by God in the creation. Even Kuyper seems to notice this in some places in his works, since he acknowledges that nothing in the state is not based in creation, namely the territory of the state, the exercise of authority in the state, the making of laws, and so on. All this he sees as developing in the course of history. This is in conflict with his conception that the state comes about as a result of human sin, and the ambiguity remains unresolved in his thought.

Concluding remarks on Kuyper

It must be said that Kuyper was not working with a thought-out philosophical system which provided the answers for the many questions he confronted in his public life as politician and reformer. Instead he often had to work through the issues as they arose, thus leaving little time for careful reflection on the deeper roots and implications of his thought. It must be acknowledged that he accomplished a great deal even with the limitations of resources available to him, and the profundity of his thought is impressive. However, it remained still strongly under the influence of scholasticism, and the nature-grace dualism evident in his view of the state comes to the fore more than once in his works, contending with the truly Biblical insights which shaped and directed the overall thrust of his thought. Kuyper himself lamented the lack of a truly Christian philosophical system to enable the development of the neo-Calvinist vision in a more authentic manner. That lack was to be provided in the next generation by Herman Dooyeweerd and his co-workers and disciples.¹⁴

Herman Dooyeweerd

The most systematic exposition and articulation of the principles espoused by Abraham Kuyper is found in the philosophical system of Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977). Dooyeweerd was a graduate of the law school of the Free University in Amsterdam, founded by Kuyper, where he gained a doctorate, and began his work on Christian political theory and philosophy while working as a researcher at the Abraham Kuyper

¹⁴ For further details of the history of neo-Calvinism, see Bernard Zylstra. Introduction. L Kalsbeek. **Contours of a Christian philosophy: an introduction to Herman Dooyeweerd's thought**. Toronto: Wedge, 1975.

Institute (1922-1926), the think-tank established by the Anti-Revolutionary Party to formulate its policies and research its principles. From 1926 to 1965 he was professor of law at the Free University. Dooyeweerd was president of the Society of the Philosophy of Law, a member of the Dutch Royal Society of Arts and Letters, and held many other important posts in Dutch intellectual society. He was widely respected as a thinker and philosopher, and was described by someone not a follower as the greatest philosopher produced by Holland, Spinoza not excepted. Dooyeweerd's work is the most extensive Christian philosophy ever developed, and is of great significance for the development of the Christian scholarly enterprise. His philosophy is rooted in the revival of Calvinism shaped by Kuyper, and refines and develops the achievements of Kuyper. His brother-in-law, Dirk Vollenhoven, was professor of philosophy at the Free University, and together with Dooyeweerd articulated this Christian systematic philosophy. Vollenhoven's contributions are mainly in the field of the history of philosophy, for which he developed a Christian methodology that enables analysis of the deepest roots and influences on the thinkers of Western civilisation.¹⁵ Vollenhoven did not make significant contributions in the field of social and political philosophy, so we will be concentrating on Dooyeweerd's views in that regard.

Dooyeweerd has been described as one of the few thinkers in the 20th century whose comprehensive theory is capable of inspiring thought in virtually any field of learning. His systematic philosophy first appeared in 1935, and was revised and published in an English translation in 1953 as **A New Critique of Theoretical Thought**. The main themes of his work are summarized in the book **Contours of a Christian Philosophy** by Kalsbeek. Dooyeweerd also wrote numerous other books and articles totalling over 200, not including numerous articles for underground newspapers (anonymous for obvious reasons) attacking the occupying Nazis during the second world war.

Dooyeweerd did not produce merely a philosophy of the Christian religion, or a prolegomena to a theological system, or a reflection on a part of the field of philosophy, but rather an encyclopaedic, integrated system of thought which encompasses the whole of reality. It is a genuine philosophy which is overtly and self-consciously attempting to be Christian. However, the possibility of a distinctly Christian philosophy is rejected by many Christians, such as Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, as well as many Christians working in the field of philosophy. The attempt by Dooyeweerd to formulate such a philosophy has generally been dismissed *a priori* by such thinkers, and others have simply ignored it or dismissed it as of no real value. For instance, James Barr describes Dooyeweerd's philosophy as an "aversion to modern theology and modern biblical studies, hankering after some sort of restored medieval situation. But most likely nothing will ever come of this. There is not sufficient interest in live philosophical questioning within fundamentalism to generate any movement."¹⁶ Barr says Dooyeweerd's philosophy is a "sort of 'philosophy' incorporating biblical and reformational insights."

¹⁵ For an overview of the history of the historiography of philosophy, and the views of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven in particular, see Henk van der Laan. "The historiography of philosophy." *Vox Reformata* 29 (1977) 1-31.

¹⁶ James Barr. **Fundamentalism**. London: SCM, 1977, p. 276.

That Dooyeweerd is not a fundamentalist is one reason why his work has not received a wide hearing in that section of Christianity, but in spite of Barr's pessimism as to its likely influence, there are now tertiary institutions in Europe, North America, Africa, Japan, Korea, Indonesia and Australia, to mention but a few, where Dooyeweerd's philosophy is taught and used as an academic tool.

Colin Brown's dismissal of Dooyeweerd

Similarly, Colin Brown dismisses Dooyeweerd in a footnote, without even giving an evaluation of his work, in his book entitled **Philosophy and the Christian Faith**. That a book with such a title can ignore one of the most significant Christian philosophers of the twentieth century demonstrates a blinkeredness hard to comprehend. Indeed, in his section "Philosophy and Reformed Theology," the only thinkers he examines are Karl Barth, Cornelius van Til and Francis Shaeffer, that is, three theologians and apologists. Brown ignores the Christian philosophers in the Reformed tradition. Brown goes on to rail against the idea of a Christian philosophy as such, and argues solely for a philosophy of the Christian religion, the subject matter for which he sees as identical with that of systematic theology, a consequence of his approach to philosophy which is rooted not in the gospel of Christ but in the philosophy of linguistic analysis. Brown asserts that we cannot hope to establish a Christian philosophy, since such a human endeavour would necessarily be incomplete and fallible. He also argues against the idea of a systematic philosophy, when he says that "there is no such thing as philosophy today... it is always the philosophy of something else." He thus argues for a philosophy of the Christian religion, but against a Christian systematic philosophy. Brown recommends eclectic use of ideas from whatever philosophies seem useful. He sees a danger in systematic philosophy as a discipline that he does not see in systematic theology, and is quite happy to accept the latter without demanding that it be complete and infallible. Similarly Arthur Holmes has argued, as have many others, that "Christian philosophy" is simply a philosophy which is considered compatible with Christianity, and there can be a number of these.

The two reasons for rejection of a Christian philosophy

The reason why the idea of a Christian philosophy is rejected is to be found in two factors. The first is the influence of nature-grace dualism, in which theology, alone thought to be regulated by divine revelation, is given a status above other disciplines in the area of grace, while philosophy, aesthetics, political theory, and every other discipline are relegated to the field of nature to be governed by the light of human reason. Since there is no direct control over philosophy by divine revelation, the only limits on philosophy have been the requirement not to undermine or criticise the conclusions of theology. This produced the attack by Hume on theology in which he said:

'Tis certainly a kind of indignity to philosophy, whose sovereign authority ought everywhere to be acknowledged, to oblige her on every occasion to make apologies for her conclusions, and justify herself to every particular

art and science, which may be offended at her. This puts one in mind of a king arraigned for high-treason against his subjects.¹⁷

The claim to independence from theology, which is commendable, is, however, seen by Hume as independence from divine revelation, a consequence of the confusion of theology and revelation by Christians for many centuries.¹⁸

The other factor preventing the development of an intrinsically Christian philosophy is the fact that throughout history Christians have tried to form a synthesis between the prevailing philosophical systems of the day and a theological system. At various times the works of Plato, Aristotle, Ockham, Descartes, Hegel, Kant, Schelling, Marx, Wittgenstein, to mention but a few, have been taken up by Christians and used as the theoretical underpinnings for both theology and other disciplines. The interest in philosophy has also usually been less for its own sake than for its use in theology. The idea of theology as the queen of the sciences, and philosophy as its handmaiden, contributed to the fact that philosophy has not flowered in its own right within the Christian community. That the rejection of a distinctly Christian philosophy owes more to the influence of such non-Christian systems of thought than to the actual possibility or otherwise of such an endeavour is usually not realised.

Dooyeweerd – all philosophy is rooted in religious commitment

In challenging this state of affairs, Dooyeweerd argues that all philosophy is rooted in a religious commitment, an acceptance of something outside of ourselves which provides the origin and meaning of reality. For the Christian, that origin and meaning is found in the Creator God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and not in the pagan and humanistic concepts of the origin and meaning which underlie most of Western philosophy. Dooyeweerd draws on the insights of Kuyper to demonstrate that the most fundamental characteristic of human beings is that they are religious, that is, that they are bound in a covenantal relationship with God, a covenant which they frequently violate.

To decide whether or not a philosophical system can be Christian requires first of all an understanding of what philosophy is, that is, how it is distinguished from other academic disciplines. Philosophy is defined as “discerning the structure of creation and describing systematically, that is, logically, what is subject to that structure.” A Christian philosophy therefore starts with the conviction that creation is called into being by the Living God, who upholds and sustains that creation constantly, governing it by his word of law and calling it to fulfil its purpose. The agents God created to care for this earth and to develop it to reach its potential, human beings, have, however, violated their covenantal relationship with their Creator, and thus carry out this task in rebellion and disobedience.

¹⁷ David Hume. **A treatise of human nature**. Book 1, Part 4, Section 5. Edited by L A Selbny-Bigge. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978, p. 250. Hume goes on to argue that his philosophy does not contradict religion, but both function independently in their own fields.

¹⁸ Theology should be seen as systematic reflection on revelation, and thus is secondary to and dependent on revelation. Theology does not mediate revelation for other areas of human activity, but provides a service to these through systematic reflection and analysis. Revelation is given by God to humankind, not to theologians or church officials to transmit to the rest of humanity by way of theology.

However, God has sent Jesus Christ to restore the creation to its former wholeness, and to renew the task of developing it towards its goal. This then is the origin and meaning of the creation, which perspective undergirds a Christian philosophy, and stands in stark contrast to the pagan Greek or humanistic concept of philosophy as to the nature of that origin and meaning. It has the same character as non-Christian philosophy, that is, an architectonic analysis of the whole of reality, working out the principles of the Christian faith in the field of philosophical thought, in order to arrive at an understanding of the origin and meaning of the creation.

A Christian philosophy

That a Christian philosophy is subject to the dictates of divine revelation has been seen as proof that it is not an independent search for truth but is beholden to external authority. But this is not the product of careful analysis as to the nature of philosophy; rather it is the viewpoint of philosophical systems which take their starting point not in divine revelation and covenantal relationship with God, but in the autonomous human reason, unfettered by any external authority, free to challenge any dogma it chooses. The dogma of the autonomous human reason is the application in the intellectual realm of the ideology of “no God, no master,” and the refusal to accept any laws save those which it imposed upon itself. The religious underpinning of this position, rooted as it is in the atheism and rationalism of the Enlightenment, is in conflict not with Christian philosophy but with Christian faith. It is a rival and antagonistic faith to which humanistic philosophy is subject, and is as subject to the dictates of that faith as Christian philosophy is to divine revelation. This can be seen for instance in the refusal of such philosophy to freely, undogmatically and openly to challenge its own dogma, namely that the only court to which thought can be held accountable is the autonomous human reason.

The cardinal difference between such philosophy and Christian philosophy is that Christ has set us free from bondage to sin to allow us in freedom to examine our own beliefs. It is the darkness that enshrouds the human heart that precludes the willingness to examine the dogma of the autonomous human reason, a darkness which is dispelled by the light of Christ, the only basis on which Christian philosophising can be conducted. From this I hope we can grasp something of the radical difference between the foundations of Christian philosophy, on which our political theory will be based, and the reflections of the darkened human heart which stands in alienation from God.

2. The Neo-Calvinist articulation of a Christian World-view

Introduction

The Neo-Calvinist approach to politics cannot be understood without some consideration of the Christian world-view which undergirds it. Indeed, it cannot be understood without grasping the significance and centrally-directing function which the concept of a world-view itself holds in that system of thought. It would not be stretching the point to say that the interest in the issue of worldviews amongst Christians today is directly traceable to the influence of Kuyper and his followers, and it is in the Kuyperian tradition that the concept of a Christian world-view has been most extensively, intensively and persistently studied.

A worldview is defined for our purposes as a non-theoretical, everyday account of how the world is. It involves some concept of the nature of the divine, and the origin and meaning of the world including the origin and nature of evil, and it provides the essential direction for those who hold that worldview. Without it, their life is meaningless and devoid of direction. Thus everybody has a worldview, which is not purely individual in character, but is shared with a community which holds to that worldview as the basis for its culture. Cultural life both reflects and strengthens the worldview which guides it. Worldviews are thus also religious, since they are rooted in a faith-commitment. That faith-commitment is seen in the way in which we answer four basic questions:

- 1) What is the nature, task and purpose of human beings?
- 2) What is the nature of the world I live in?
- 3) What is the basic obstacle that prevents fulfilment? (what is evil?)
- 4) How is it possible to overcome this obstacle? (what is means of salvation?)

Or: Who am I? Where am I? What's wrong? What's the remedy?

There are four basic categories of world-view in Western thought:

1. Form-matter, the pagan Greek world-view
2. Creation-fall-redemption-consummation, the Biblical world-view,
3. Nature-grace, the mediaeval synthesis of the Greek and Biblical world-views,
4. Nature-freedom, the secularisation of the mediaeval world-view in the Enlightenment.

The variations within these categories are of less importance at the moment than grasping the main lines of development in Western culture. The characteristic structures of the world-views of non-Western culture have been much less studied and it would be of interest to examine them, but they need not concern us now. Suffice it to say that the

world-views of Western culture are predominantly dualistic (earliest Greeks monistic), while those of non-Western culture seem to be almost exclusively monistic. One prominent example of a monistic Western worldview is found in Spinoza.

Religion

The nature of religion as understood in neo-Calvinism is crucial for the whole structure of its thought.¹⁹ Religion cannot be reduced to merely its cultic expression or personal piety. Rather, religion is the basic dynamic of human life, that is, religion is our covenantal relationship with God that encompasses all that we are as human beings. We have broken that relationship, but the covenant remains in force. By a covenant, I mean an historical relationship, established by God with humankind at creation, on which God builds throughout human history. Because of sin, that covenant has had to become a covenant of redemption in addition to a covenant of grace towards his creation. We see a periodic renewal of that covenant at strategic points in redemptive history, culminating in the new and final covenantal relationship established in Jesus Christ. God has re-established relationships with us by means of Jesus Christ. Those who repent and turn in faith to God through Christ are restored into covenantal blessing, those who continue to reject God and his offer of salvation in Christ are subject to the curses of the covenant. Human life then reflects the condition of either blessing or curse that moulds our lives in keeping with our response to God.

Those who have rejected God and his divine revelation cannot thereby change their basic nature, that is, to be religious beings, and so they seek out a substitute god to worship and a substitute revelation by which to direct their lives. This substitute god is idolatry, while the substitute revelation is myth. God thus stands over against all false gods, while his revelation in Christ, creation and Scripture stands over against all myth. The idols of unbelievers originate in fastening on one or more aspects of creation and elevating that to the status of divinity, while myths are formulated by the apostate imagination to explain and justify that idolatry, thus claiming to act as divine revelation. Returning now to the nature of religion, we see it is the belief in anything with the status of the “divine,” which is anything that is not dependent on anything else.²⁰

The way in which the divine and non-divine are divided up can be characterised by four different schemes.

- i. Part of the cosmos is seen as divine (Polytheism).

The characteristics of the divine are extended into the cosmos. By seeing some creatures as divine, their relationships with other creatures are distorted, and the community of all God’s creation is broken. The Biblical message concerning both God and his creation is obscured, as each is seen to have characteristics which are properly ascribed to the other.

- ii. Part of the divine is seen in the cosmos.

¹⁹ See Henk van der Laan. “The meaning of religion.” *Vox Reformata* 32 (1979) 13-32.

²⁰ See Roy Clouser. **The myth of religious neutrality**. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991, p. 19.

In this worldview, that which is divine is included in the cosmos, through ascribing to the creation that which is proper to God. A tendency of such a worldview is to limit the powers of the divine by arraying powerful creatures against the divine. The Babylonian myths, in which the gods had to struggle against powerful creatures in order to be free to rule, are an example of this kind of worldview.

iii. All of the divine is seen in the cosmos (pan-cosmism).

The cosmos is primary, and what is considered divine arises out of the cosmos and does not transcend the cosmos, as the cosmos creates the divine. The divine comes into being either as a result of cosmic forces, or through human activity. Examples are the pagan views in which the gods arise out of the earth, or modern views which hold that gods are merely the product of creaturely activity. The creation is ascribed actions and powers properly the work of God, and God is seen as dependent on creatures.

iv. All of the cosmos is seen as divine (pantheism).

Only the divine exists, and what we consider cosmos is in fact divine. If the cosmos and the divine are co-extensive, this is known as pantheism: the view that everything is divine. The modification of this view called panentheism sees the cosmos as divine, but not exhausting the divine.

The way in which the cosmos and the divine are seen to be related thus shapes our conception of reality. It is essential then to correctly understand the distinction between the Creator and the creation: any confusion leads to pagan misconceptions and this necessarily results in mythologising.

The neo-Calvinist worldview sees human society as governed by two dynamics, that of faith versus idolatry, and that of differentiation. The domination of economic considerations in Western life is idolatry, defined by Bob Goudzwaard as an ideology which treats something of *some* value as if it were of *ultimate* value. It is an example of one aspect of creation being treated as divine, and thus placed above human control, rather than being put under human stewardship.

Wolterstorff suggests that one distinction between Liberation theology and neo-Calvinism is that the former focuses on sin as the root cause of misery in society, while the neo-Calvinist focuses on idolatry as the root cause. This is, however, as Wolterstorff admits not an exclusive characterisation, since sin can be analysed in terms of idolatrous commitments, while idolatry is of course undoubtedly sin. The difference is more in terms of the method of analysis used to come to grips with the problem: liberation theology uses the sinful nature which manifests itself in injustice, while neo-Calvinism uses the structures which are established under the direction of that sinful nature, which also manifest themselves in injustice. Both are attacking the same end-problem, although from different angles and with ultimately much the same conclusion. Another way of putting it is that liberation theology deals with the phenomenon of injustice as it is

experienced by the oppressed, while neo-Calvinism deals with the structural injustice which produces the oppression.

Neo-Calvinism also rejects, along with Liberation theology, the idea that salvation can be restricted in a dualistic way to a purely “spiritual” level. Both argue for an integral liberation of the whole person through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Creation

Creation is central to the neo-Calvinist or reformational world-view. It refers to the fact that everything that exists was brought into being by the Creator at the beginning. There is nothing that exists that was not established by God. Human formative activity can mould and uncover what is already there, and bring new expressions of the creation into being, but there is no way we can bring into being anything not already present as potential in the creation.

When God created at the beginning, he brought into being concrete creatures which are not reducible to simpler structures. Thus any attempt to break down the creation further, as for instance in distinguishing form and matter, leads only to confusion and error. God did not create by giving form to matter, so that these can somehow be separated; he called specific, real concrete creatures into being, and these exist as such and not as combinations of something other than what they are as creatures.

The neo-Calvinist view of creation insists that what God has brought into being is constantly subjected to his ordering and sustaining word. That order existed from the first moment in which creatures came into being. There was no pre-existent or subsequent state of chaos or absence of order. The traditional view of Genesis 1 has been that God has brought order out of a chaotic disorder. This view actually owes more to pagan Greek speculations about cosmogony than to the witness of Scripture. There we find confirmed on every hand that the world is ordered by God.

The suggestion that in Genesis 1:2 we can read of a chaos principle which resists God’s creation, or that it refers simply to disorder waiting to be ordered, needs to be carefully examined. What we actually find in that passage is that the original creation of the heavens and the earth recounted in Genesis 1:1 is waiting further development and ordering from the hand of God. It is not a disordered chaos, it is not a principle resisting God. The creation was not *completed* or *developed* initially, but was barren and desolate, that is, in terms of the purpose of Genesis 1, it cannot serve as the home of living things. It needs to be further developed. The creation was only gradually brought into being as a world full of diversity and complexity. But at every point we see only order, the creatures of God subject to their creator. It was the world over which the Holy Spirit was attentive. To suggest that the original creation of the heavens and the earth left the earth in a state of chaos which needed to be overcome introduces a dualism into God himself: he is both a God of order and a God of chaos.

Such a conception is unwarranted mythologising speculation and contrary to the witness of Scripture. God only brings order into being, although he does not initially have to

bring a finished product into being. But an unfinished product is not a chaos: it is merely incomplete, requiring further work, and this work is described in the rest of Genesis 1 until the climax is reached in 2:1. The earth then cannot have been a chaos initially or at any other stage.²¹ The *tohu wa-bohu* which is mentioned is not chaos and disorder, it is simply a description of the state of the world: empty and uninhabitable. That was not a negative ascription, *except in relation to the total purpose of God*, namely, to prepare a home for living things.

The Patristic writers interpreted Genesis 1 in terms of the giving of form to unformed matter. In that context, the *tohu wa-bohu* of Genesis 1:2 was seen as referring to such matter. But there is no hint of such a concept in Genesis, as God does not create by imposing form upon matter, a dualistic concept at odds with Scripture, but by calling into being complete creatures. God created the animals as animals, not by imposing animal forms on matter.

The understanding of creation in Liberation Theology is shaped by an interpretation of Scripture which gives priority to redemption. Creation is then seen as an act of redemption, extrapolated backwards by the people of Israel after their exodus from Egypt, the paradigmatic act of redemption. They purportedly speculated that the God who had rescued them and thereby defeated the gods of the Egyptians must have been also the God who created the world and had supreme authority over it. Since redemption is primary in this approach, creation is also seen as an act of redemption.²² The problem with this view, which is found in the thought of Karl Barth and many other theologians, as well as in Liberation Theology, is that it is essentially meaningless. If creation is an act of redemption, then what is it that creation redeems from? The very act of creation in that case becomes a deliverance from some evil, but what evil was there prior to creation, when only God existed? This problem can be seen in the rather bizarre speculations of Karl Barth concerning the so-called “nothingness” which God negated by creating this world.²³ This originates in his insistence in seeing every act of God within the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ, a view that thereby forces grace into the mould of redemption. As we shall see a little later, the neo-Calvinist view includes the doctrine of common grace, that is, grace that originates with and sustains God’s creative acts: it does not originate in God’s redemptive acts. This distinction is not to be understood ontologically, as if there were two kinds of grace in God’s relationship with human beings. Rather this distinction is to be understood in terms of the history of God’s redemptive acts which follow his creative acts and which restore that creation again.

²¹ For a detailed discussion of this theme see G C Berkouwer. *Sin*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, pp. 79-98.

²² Gutierrez. *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 158.

²³ See S U Zuidema. “The structure of Karl Barth’s doctrine of creation.” In: **Communication and Confrontation: A philosophical appraisal and critique of modern society and contemporary thought**. Assen/Kampen: Royal VanGorcum/J H Kok, 1972, pp. 309-328. Jeffrey Dudiak. *Barth’s doctrine of nothingness: creational and theological reflections*. Unpublished Seminar Paper, Institute for Christian Studies, 1986.

The cultural mandate

Inseparable from the neo-Calvinist view of creation is the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:26-28. That cultural mandate involves the freedom of humankind to shape and mould the world we live in through control over it. That control is not unfettered, since it is to be carried out in response to God's mandate: a call to stewardship and development, neither unhindered development nor static preservation.²⁴ That cultural mandate however has come under the bondage of sin as a result of the fall, and so is carried out in violation of and in rebellion against the Word of God for humankind. That mandate cannot be ignored since it is constitutive of human being: we are stewards and developers of the creation, it is not an activity we do or a role that we fill, rather, it is who we are: God's stewardly developers. This is perhaps the closest we can get to defining the image of God: it is our createdness as God's representatives in the creation, called to care for and unfold it to the glory of God, exploring and discovering what lies hidden within it, and bringing that hiddenness to light in all the multivarious ways which humans can find to do so: that is, they can form their lives and their surroundings freely in response to God's call to be imagers. This cultural mandate is the obligation to set loose the dynamics of history rather than be bound by tradition. This task we call *culture*, and the right we possess to do this originates in God's *mandate* to us.

The emphasis in Kuyper's thought concerning creation is that the human task is to discover and develop what is already present in the creation, not to bring into being something which does not already exist. The creation started in perfection, but has been subject to brokenness and distortion because of human sin. That original perfection of the creation is rooted in the order God established for it, an order which cannot be done away with, although that which is subject to the order can rebel and bring about distortion and fracture.

Wolterstorff sees the concept of the cultural mandate as one area in which neo-Calvinism is superior to Liberation Theology, since in that view creation is of merely salvific significance, and is of no intrinsic importance in itself.

The Fall

The fall into sin, caused by the breaking of the covenant relationship with God, introduced into human society the conflict between sin and grace. This is given concrete expression in the Augustinian ideal of the conflict between the City of this world and the City of God, and in the reformational world-view in the concept of antithesis. The essence of the antithesis is the conviction that in society we see a conflict between obedient covenantal and disobedient idolatrous allegiances contending for the opportunity to shape and direct human life. This conflict explains one fundamental dynamic within human society: it is not incidental to the social order but lies at the very root of our social order. No explanation of the way the world is can be satisfactory without taking account of this antithesis, and most accounts do in one form or another,

²⁴

See Douglas Hall. **Imaging God: Dominion as stewardship.**

although most misconstrue it because of their basic idolatrous commitments to humanly generated myth.

The most common approach in idolatrous religion is to see the antithesis not between God's covenantal grace and human sin, but between creatures themselves. This ontologising or localising of evil is seen in Reagan's famous description of the USSR as the "evil empire," that is, the localisation of evil "over there." By so doing, evil is removed from "over here," and so the antithesis is established between "them" and "us," and justification is thereby given to plans to eliminate the evil, for instance by destruction of the "evil" by nuclear war. Similarly, racism, some forms of feminism, and other "isms" locate the evil in a group of human beings, either those of another race or all or most other races, those of another gender, those of another sexual persuasion, those of another religious persuasion, e.g. the Iranian characterisation of America as "the Great Satan," and classism, those of another economic/social class, as in Marxism; locating evil in the rich and righteousness in the poor; this tendency we could call "social dualism." Instead of seeing the antithesis between groups of people or parts of the creation, the Scriptures place it within each human heart: all of us have a divided nature with a conflict between sin and grace which runs through every part of our lives.

The ways in which we shape and direct our human society, that is, our cultural formative power, are under the influence of two opposing forces: believing response to the grace of God and the rebellion of the human heart which leads to apostasy and idolatry. Some human culture therefore is destructive and oppressive, and in all human societies is restricted in some form or other, to a greater or lesser extent, by the power of tradition, vested interest, false ideologies and false religion.

One aspect of political thought which arises in connection with the discussion of creation and fall is the origin of the state. Did it come into being because of the fall, or was it ordained by God prior to the fall? There have been many debates about this question, with the tendency being towards an anti-state approach, which sees it solely the consequence of sin. Had Adam and Eve not sinned, the state would not have come into existence. This is one root of the idea that politics is dirty and to be avoided by the Christian. However, the problem arises of a coherent order of creation. If the state was only ordained subsequent to the fall, then how does it cohere with the rest of society ordained in the creation? But if the state was ordained along with the rest of society in the creation, then its central task cannot be the restraining of sin, as would be the case in the other view. Instead, the state is to ensure justice between the members of society and their institutions, a task required whether Adam and Eve had sinned or not. The problem for this view is to explain why there is a need to ensure justice between people who have not sinned. This is usually tackled by saying that justice is not primarily focused on redressing wrongs, but ensuring rights. The state would therefore exist for that purpose whether or not humankind had fallen in sin. We will deal with this issue further in the fourth chapter.

Redemption

Because the purposes of God for the creation involve its consummation and fulfilment in the glory of God, then the effects of human covenant-breaking must be dealt with wherever they are found. As the hymn by Isaac Watts puts it (Joy to the World),

No more let sin and sorrow grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground:
He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.

The redemptive work of Christ is not simply personal in nature but cosmic: the whole of the created order is redeemed in Christ and restored once again to obedient relationship to God. The non-human creation suffers under the domination of its disobedient stewards, and through their redemption the non-human creation is set free once again to pursue its proper task. This has obvious implications for environmental issues.²⁵

Most Western theologies see redemption in purely personal terms, and the concept of a cosmic redemption is almost unknown to most theologians. Very few books have ever been written on this subject. The non-human creation is rarely seen as included in the redemptive work of Christ, in spite of clear witness to the contrary in Scripture. A reformational perspective on the other hand sees salvation as an act of the creator God restoring that creation and defeating the disruption that afflicts it, no matter where that disruption and sin is found. The work of redemption therefore extends as far as the effects of sin: no sin lies outside of the possibility of redemption, and no effect of sin cannot be reversed in Christ's work of redemption.

Reform is one of the practical outworkings of the redemption of Christ renewing human life. While we cannot always accomplish the needed social reform which the Word of God demands of us, that which we can manage to achieve is commended by God. Wolterstorff characterises the distinction between Calvinist and Lutheran views in this regard. While the Lutheran sees the best option of the variety of choices presented to us in this world as the lesser of two evils, for which we must seek forgiveness for doing the unavoidable evil, the Calvinist views the best of these options as the right thing to do and therefore brings a clear conscience rather than a guilty conscience. The Calvinist does not demand perfection, only obedience to the best of our ability aided by the grace of God.

Wolterstorff mentions that one of the typical Calvinist failings is triumphalism, which is the belief that the needed reformation has already occurred, and all we need to do is ensure its survival in society in its present form. Wolterstorff says that South African Calvinists present this in its purest form.

²⁵ For details of the reformational approach to environmental issues see Loren Wilkenson. **Earthkeeping: Christian stewardship of natural resources**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.

Eschaton

The consummation of the purposes of God for the creation is the manifestation of the glory of God throughout all that he has created. The goal of the redemptive work of Christ is the new heavens and the new earth, and the resurrection of all believing humankind to live for eternity in God's new earth.²⁶ The dualistic tradition of Christianity postulates an eternal heaven which is other than and separate from this earthly life. The Platonic roots of this concept are undisputed, but the images and doctrine based on that Platonism remain entrenched in the Christian consciousness. The anti-creational and individualistic approach inherent in that view has been specifically repudiated by the neo-Calvinist tradition, which holds to an earthly-oriented eschaton, in terms of the new earth promised in Revelation and Isaiah, and which focuses on the resurrection from the dead and not the life of the immortal soul in an ethereal heaven. The dualistic anthropology which underlies our concept of heaven and eternity needs to be scrupulously rooted out and discarded. The Scriptures never speak of human beings going to spend eternity in heaven with God: they speak instead of God descending from heaven to spend eternity on the new earth with resurrected and redeemed humanity.²⁷

On the new earth all that has been redeemed, that is, the entire creation order, will be present. All that God has made, and all that human beings have made of it to glorify God, will be revealed there in its true splendour. Then we will see the full manifestation of the kingdom of God, which we now see only in part, and in anticipation of the coming realisation. What we now have of the reality of the kingdom of God is in a sense the future reaching back into the present.²⁸

²⁶ See G C Berkouwer. **The Return of Christ**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, pp. 211-234.

²⁷ For an excellent exposition of this theme see: David Lawrence. **Heaven: it's not the end of the world!** London: Scripture Union, 1995.

²⁸ For a detailed discussion of the kingdom of God see Herman Ridderbos. **The Coming of the Kingdom**. Presbyterian and Reformed publishing Company, 1962.

3. Sphere sovereignty as a theory of society

The false alternatives of dualism and monism that we looked at in the last chapter are in stark contrast to the Biblical doctrine of creation. There we do not find God forming creatures from a combination of form and matter in a dualistic manner, nor do we find creatures emerging from the one source in a monistic manner, as in evolutionary theory. Rather, we find a diversity of specific creatures formed as such by God, characterised by a web of interlacing relationships so that together they all form a harmonious order of creation. The unity of creation is not found in the common substance from which things are made, as in dualist theories, nor in the common origin they share, as in monist theories, but in being subject to the one law-order established by God for the creation. That law-order provides the conditions for the existence of all God's creatures, and ensures their functioning according to the intention of God for them. In terms of social life, that comes to expression in the doctrine of sphere sovereignty. That theory stands in contrast to the false alternatives of collectivism and individualism presented to us by non-Christian perspectives on society, which were examined in the article by Spykman on pluralism.²⁹

Indispensable to a world-formative Christianity is the idea of an architectonic vision and critique of society, that is, an analysis of its structure and dynamics. Our institutions often do things they should not. There are large-scale social practices often approved of by society as a whole, which generate or perpetuate injustice and misery. In what way are these problems the result of an inadequate understanding of the structure and task of the various institutions in society? That is the issue which confronts us in the doctrine of sphere sovereignty, which sets out to develop a correct understanding of those institutions and their tasks.

Kuyper in opposition to the Constantinian model

Kuyper's vision of society differed drastically from that of John Calvin on a very significant point: Kuyper rejected the Constantinian ideal of society in which the membership of the church and membership of civil society was identical. While the Anabaptists rejected this identification, the mainstream reformers including Calvin continued to support the Constantinian model, and thus Calvin was implicated in the burning of Servetus for heresy. The continuation of this view of society and the resulting religious wars that followed the reformation, was in fact in radical conflict with the basic thrust of Calvin's own thought, but his failure to break out of the Mediaeval synthesis led to the decline in acceptability of the Reformation and increased the appeal of the secular state where no one theology is imposed under penalty, save ultimately the theology of secularism itself.

²⁹ Gordon Spykman. "Pluralism: our last best hope?" *Christian Scholars Review* 10 (1980) 99-115.

Rule of the strongest

Kuyper asserted that nobody has the intrinsic right to rule over others, since that right immediately becomes the rule of the strongest.³⁰ The authority to rule is instead delegated from God. Similarly Kuyper rejects the idea of a “social contract” made in earlier ages which now binds us into a political order. This is again the right of the strongest to enforce a contract in which we had no free part in making, as well as based on an entirely fictitious conception of society. Kuyper rejected the idea that we should bow down to any human being by right since they are no different to us. God alone is sovereign. Kuyper thus rejects the idea of the right of the majority to rule, since sovereignty comes from God, not from any number of people no matter how great. As a result, Kuyper fought long and hard for proportional representation, since only in that way can justice be done to the needs of all. He rejected majority rule as the tyranny of numbers. Kuyper stressed that the idea of freedom can reach its fulfilment only with a correct view of society, that is, with the protection of the sovereignty of the various spheres, since otherwise there is no check on the power of the majority. Thus he rejects the idea of popular sovereignty, since the view that the state derives its authority from the will of the people leads only to the tyranny of the majority, violating the rights of minorities.

Kuyper held that the state can only prosper where it gives due recognition to the differences between various minorities in the nation. He accuses the modern state of destroying the rightful diversity and cultural differences of the various cultural groups. He claims that “uniformity is the curse of modern life.”³¹

Differentiation and disclosure of society

Dooyeweerd sees *differentiation* as the norm for human history. Cultural activity and therefore human history should move in the direction of increasing differentiation, that is, the disclosure of that which God has hidden within the creation. Any cultural activity which does not increasingly disclose this differentiation is regressive and disobedient to God’s command. Dooyeweerd saw this exemplified in Nazi Germany where the attempt was made to reverse the historic disclosure of society and to revert to a tribal ideology of “blood and soil” under the inspiration of romantic nationalism.

Differentiation of society results when the respective callings of humankind are respected and allowed and encouraged to develop. Differentiation is the process of specialisation of human tasks and of human societal structures, allowing the various spheres of society to come into their own by disclosing their own inner nature. In an undifferentiated culture the various spheres of society are still absorbed within the tribal or state structure, as in feudalism. We can see this in the Scriptures in the history of Israel, which moved from being a tribal people under the authority of the head of the clan (Abraham, Isaac and

³⁰ Abraham Kuyper. **Lectures on Calvinism**. Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1931, p. 103.

³¹ J M van der Kroef. “Abraham Kuyper and the rise of Neo-Calvinism in the Netherlands.” *Church History* 17 (1948) 330.

Jacob) to the leadership of Moses and under him tribal elders, to the establishment of the kingship and various government officials in the kingdom.

The priesthood was separated off from the political leadership, and the heads of families were no longer the supreme authority with power of life and death, as with Abraham, who served as father, political leader, head of the army, priest, and every other leadership function. All these were concentrated in Abraham, a situation we find in any undifferentiated tribal society. But over time we see the increasing differentiation and diversification of tasks, with specific responsibilities given to some and not to others.

This is a recognition of the inherent diversity of human life created by God, and the different tasks he has entrusted to each of us. Through differentiation we are enabled to carry out these tasks without interference, and without demands on us to perform other tasks. Non-Christian views of society sometimes seek to reverse this differentiation, as with the Nazis, and in some sections of the hippy and counter-culture movements of the past. Communes which were set up under such views were often opposed to the differentiation of society, which was interpreted as fragmentation, and the attempt was made to revert to undifferentiated societal life. Such attempts failed because they run counter to the inner dynamic of human life.

The differentiation and disclosure in human society of the hidden potential of the creation is driven forward by its own inner dynamic, that is, granting freedom to human cultural endeavour in a non-idolatrous manner will inevitably lead to that disclosure. In neo-Calvinist terms this is seen as the special work of the Holy Spirit within the creation. One of the greatest weaknesses of the dualistic approach to culture found in evangelical and liberal Protestant Christianity, and in Roman Catholicism, and I might add particularly in Charismatic Christianity, is the inability to successfully relate cultural activity to the work of the Holy Spirit. But in the neo-Calvinist vision of the Holy Spirit driving the creation on towards its consummation in the full disclosure of its potential to the glory of God we have a means of understanding both why cultural formation occurs, and what part God plays in it.³² Dooyeweerd describes the cause of the differentiation of various spheres as the work of God governing the creation in ways that call for a dynamic unfolding of human social life. Human response to God's call whether in obedience or disobedience gives us the differentiating world we have today, where we see both the tragic consequences of human disobedience as well as the greatness of God's grace at work in our midst.

The disclosure of society and its resulting differentiation is a *normed* disclosure. It does not follow arbitrary directions but is governed by the norm for that structure or institution. A norm is that by which we discern the normal and the abnormal, and is given by God in the ordering of creation. These norms are frequently discovered intuitively, and confirmed by empirical analysis of society. That is, we have a sense of what should and should not be happening in the structures of society, which can be verified through

³² For details of the work of the Holy Spirit in driving the creation to its destiny see Abraham Kuyper. **The work of the Holy Spirit**. Chapter 1, Part iv and passim. Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1900. Reprinted 1979.

examining the inner nature and task of those structures to see whether this truly characterises what is happening.

Political institutions follow the norm for the state, economic institutions for the norm for those particular structures, marriage and family life according to the norms for those structures. In that way, life within each sphere can unfold and develop in its own unique but normed way. This means that one sphere cannot dominate another, since to do so would hinder or prevent the development of both spheres according to their own proper inner nature and the norms they should follow. This then leads to the concept of the sovereignty of each of the spheres: they have their own task to fulfil which cannot be performed by any other sphere, nor can they fulfil the task of another sphere. Each has sovereignty over its own task and the responsibility before God to ensure that that task is carried out in obedience to the norms for that task. Over-expansion of the power of any one sphere threatens the other spheres, since their unfolding must be retarded by that illegitimate domination by that sphere. Nor can that sphere properly fulfil its own task since it is expending its effort erroneously on tasks which are not proper to it.

An example from New Zealand

An example of this in New Zealand is the way virtually everything has been subordinated to economic growth and to the norm of profit-making. As a result we see the reduction of all our institutions to economic enterprises, so that model is the only one considered appropriate for a wide variety of institutions. The privatisation drive with free-market and user-pays economics shaping the nature of every institution shows how distortion comes as a result of the domination of the whole of society by one sphere. Hospitals, schools, housing, radio, and everything else are all being forced into the mould of economic enterprises under the influence of an economistic ideology that refuses to accept the legitimacy of institutions which exist for purposes other than making a profit.³³ Unless this drive towards economic reductionism is halted then New Zealand society will cease to develop and differentiate and will become what Dooyeweerd calls a closed down society: vast possibilities and potential will have no opportunity to be disclosed because they do not fit the only acceptable model of human life: the economic enterprise.³⁴ This is what Goudzwaard calls a “tunnel society,” and a tunnel it must be stressed which has no light at its end since it is leading us into the darkness away from the light of God’s Word, which calls us to open up society, not to close it down.

The other problem which constantly besets New Zealand political life is the endless and sterile debate over “interventionism.” This debate is based not on what is the proper understanding of the nature and task of government, but whether or not it is proper for the state to arbitrarily intervene to adjust, prevent or stimulate some development or other in non-government areas of society. Instead of attempting to discern what the proper task of the state is, and then to do it, the debate over interventionism focuses on whether or not the state should act to produce a desired result in a specific situation.

³³ Cf. Goudzwaard's stress on simultaneous realisation of norms. **Capitalism and Progress: a diagnosis of Western Society**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979, pp. 205-207.

³⁴ For a detailed analysis of this phenomenon see Bob Goudzwaard. **Capitalism and Progress**.

By rejecting “interventionism” the National Government has made it impossible for itself to act so as to ensure justice in non-government spheres of society, leaving many issues to resolution by “market forces,” while “interventionists” often seem to want the state to arbitrarily impose its will on non-government spheres of society so as to produce what is seen to be a desired outcome. There is no principle underlying such intervention which would ensure that the state is not overstepping its proper responsibilities nor neglecting others. Only a grasp of the proper nature and task of the state can resolve such issues. Sphere sovereignty is an attempt to clarify this situation.

Sphere sovereignty

The principle of sphere sovereignty is simply the recognition that in society there is a diversity of structures each having their own internal structure and authority, which arises from their own special tasks. The spheres of society receive their sovereignty from God and not from the state. That means that no one sphere or bearer of authority is the highest, from which all the others derive their power and right to exist. Rather, society is comprised of all the spheres together, co-ordinated with each other, not subordinated to any one or more of them in a hierarchical fashion, as we find in the Catholic view of society. Instead, these structures are all co-ordinate with each other. That is, they are jointly and individually subject to the ordering Word of God, which is immediately directing each and every structure in society. Each structure must respond in its own way to the Word of God, which is not mediated by another structure, nor may they be hindered from doing so by another structure.

While each sphere is sovereign in its own field, and has its own norms to follow, that does not mean that it is isolated or independent of the other spheres, since the norms for the spheres are norms for human life as a whole, life which is intrinsically of one piece and is subject to the one Law of God for life. While we can distinguish proper areas of responsibility and authority in life, discerning a variety of sovereign spheres which have been disclosed by human cultural formation, human beings live into all these spheres as whole beings, not as fragmented beings. This differentiation is to permit the carrying out of specialised tasks within human society, and not to allow people to live as though they had no responsibility or accountability to others. This process of differentiation and the realisation of a variety of norms is to serve humankind in its responsibility before God, to care for and develop the earth in a stewardly way, and to allow human life to unfold in all its fullness. Without proper development and differentiation of human life, possibilities which God has laid before us are prevented from being realised to the full, or even in any measure. The purpose of disclosure in society is to bring the human potential to actualisation. It is a life-affirming process, a process of liberation and restoration to wholeness: it is not a process of fragmentation or restriction. Without this process of disclosure we would not even know what our possibilities were; but in disclosing society in this way new and exciting possibilities continually open up before us. It is a creative and open-ended process, stimulated and borne along by the Holy Spirit.

The state is only one of the spheres of society, with the task of protecting the other spheres of society. Its task is to ensure the establishment and maintenance of just relations between all spheres, including the proper sovereignty of those spheres. Those

that are weak must be enabled to become strong, those that overreach their proper bounds must be drawn back. The areas of sovereignty of each sphere can be discerned from God's revelation both directly and as it illuminates our experience and understanding of the world he has created. The state may not interfere with the proper exercise of the authority of those sovereign spheres. This derives from Kuyper's conception of society as made up of individuals in organic relationship with others in various societal structures. Individuals in isolation do not exist: they have their being only in and through the spheres of society. "No man is an island" is Kuyper's view. Kuyper held that the individual person can only find true freedom in ties with the institutions of society. Therefore Kuyper also rejected individualism, the idea that the individual is the basic unit of human society, since the individual is unthinkable outside of his or her family. He also rejected collectivism, since this violates the rights of persons to free development and responsibility. Society is correctly understood as individuals in relationship; relationships that are not externally imposed, whether voluntarily or compulsorily, but relationships within which we stand as created beings formed by God in the community of humankind.

All human beings are placed in a number of communities. We are born into a web of relationships, which constitute our societal existence. There is therefore no such thing as the autonomous and isolated individual, and so individualistic views of society are excluded. Margaret Thatcher is one example of a radical individualist. She has said that there is no such thing as society, there are only individuals. Similarly, collectivist views are excluded, since human beings do exist as individuals, and not simply as members of society. We are not constituted by our relationships, since ultimately in that view individuals do not exist, only the relationships between them, but we are individuals in relationship, an unavoidable state of affairs, the way in which God has established the creation.

In order to understand how Kuyper saw the principle of sphere sovereignty working it is necessary to consider the way in which Scripture is understood in the Neo-Calvinist perspective.

The Scriptures are seen as a Covenantal document, an articulation of the revelation of God to humankind, which has a confessional force: that is, it directs our faith and guides us in outworking that faith on a daily basis. Theology, on the other hand, is considered to be a human scientific enterprise (that is, of theoretical character), which engages in analysis of the faith, its governing text in Scripture, its articulation in Creeds, and its practice in worship and in daily life, and results in a theoretical presentation of the results of this analysis. The Scriptures are thus considered to be not theological in character, but confessional, that is, accessible to ordinary Christians without the necessity of theoretical training, i.e. theology.

The difference is that the Scriptures do not present theoretical analysis but articulation of the faith. It is only the analytical reflection and construction of systems of thought using the materials of Scripture which can be considered theology. While the work of theologians should serve the body of Christian believers, it cannot act in a mediating role, so that access to the Word of God can come only through theology and theologians. Rather, the body of Christian believers has access directly to their covenant document,

which directs and shapes their faith and their daily lives as they give expression to their lives in various structures of society. Thus each structure in society has a responsibility to respond obediently to this covenant document, which directs them in the expression of their faith.

Neo-Calvinist view of the church

There have been many problems caused by the concept that the church is the institution par excellence where the grace of God is operative, while other institutions can experience God's grace only through the mediation of the church. This is the Roman Catholic concept of sphere subsidiarity, but it is not the neo-Calvinist view. Rather, the church institution is distinguished from the body of Christ, the covenant people of God who wish to walk in obedience in all that they do. The church institution is seen not as the primary or sole means of expression of the life of discipleship, but only as one sphere in which that discipleship is expressed.

Because all spheres of society are rooted in the creation, coming from the hand of God, and because God's redemptive grace in Christ comes to human beings in the wholeness of their being, that grace is worked out in everything they do. It can come to concrete expression in any kind of institution whatsoever. In the church institution, we see that grace expressed in explicitly articulated form, in worship, in proclamation of the Scriptures, in discipling and teaching, in creedal affirmation, in the sacraments and in the fellowship of the saints. But that redeemed life of grace can also come to valid and full expression in politics, in the arts, in education, in leisure activities, in banking, in building construction, in short: in any conceivable human activity whatsoever. By that I mean that the new life given by Christ to the covenant people of God shapes the direction in which they mould and unfold their lives and the institutions and activities in which they are involved.

The various structures of society are not human constructs, as the ideology of the Enlightenment and revolution would contend. If that were the case, then they could be changed and altered or abandoned without consequence should we so choose. Instead, what we find is that these structures are enduring and rooted in the indestructible order of creation. The neo-Calvinist approach to creation, which we considered briefly in the previous chapter, sees the structures of society established by God in the creation order, and that humankind shapes and moulds these structures according to their desire (whether in sin or in obedience). The possibility of the structures of society is therefore a given, and while some of them are sometimes left latent in any particular society, we cannot create structures which are not based on the potential God has created, nor can we simply abolish such structures once disclosed and developed, since they are rooted in the enduring creation order established and upheld by God.

The responsibility of the state

The responsibility of the state is to ensure just relationships within and between the other spheres of society. For instance, Kuyper recognised the rights of trade unions with state

recognition of those unions, as well as the rights of employers' groups. Neither employees nor employers were entitled to exploit or victimise the other.

As a result Kuyper denounced *laissez-faire* capitalism, that is, the ideology of the “free market,” since this produces the tyranny of the rich over the working class. He also denounced the tyranny of trade unions which attempted to impose their wishes on employers without regard to the proper norms which govern employer-employee relationships. Trade unions are understood by Dooyeweerd to be “voluntary associations,” that is, one which people are free to join or not to join as they desire. This is because a trade union is not a necessary part of employment; it is not an essential component of the ability to perform a particular task for an employer, and so membership cannot be compulsory. Trade unions are an additional way in which workers can organise themselves for common purposes. Compulsory union membership is a violation of the rights of individuals through the imposition of a collectivist ideology based on the supposed solidarity of all workers. Since workers hold allegiances to different visions of society, a trade union which is imposed on all workers in a particular industrial sector, regardless of their convictions, cannot be true to its own nature. This is one reason behind the collapse of the trade union movement in New Zealand. The rather infamous Employment Contracts Act (which abolished compulsory union membership) was only the occasion and not the cause for their demise. However, since membership of a trade union is a voluntary association unrelated to carrying out a particular job, neither can an employer *prevent* membership in a trade union.

Dooyeweerd instead posits the idea of unions based on common perspectives on working life; a union based on the way workers wish to conduct their activities and understand the world. Such a union leaves people free to join or not, in accordance with their agreement with the basis on which the union operates.³⁵

This positive approach to trade unions has led to the formation of Christian Trade Unions not only in Holland but also in Canada (the Christian Labor Association of Canada), and it is in this Christian labour movement that some of the most interesting and fruitful work has been done on the nature of work and employment in modern society.³⁶ The task of the state is to protect the legitimate rights and interests of both employers and employees. Kuyper wanted to establish a co-operative perspective in business, in opposition to the concept of class warfare which underlies most trade union ideology.

Justice according to the Neo-Calvinist theory

Unless we enter into a detailed analysis of the institutions and structured relationships between institutions in the world then we cannot develop a theory which supports the struggle for justice. The functional analysis of such institutions and relationships

³⁵ This is similar to the basis of the trade union movement in Europe generally. While New Zealand previously had about 300 unions for its workers, based on the common tasks of the workers, Germany had 18 unions, based on the common vision of the workers.

³⁶ See Bob Goudzwaard. **Capitalism and Progress**, for more details of the Christian approach to trade unions and work. See also L Kalsbeek. **Contours of a Christian Philosophy**, pp. 252-254.

provided in neo-Calvinist theory is the kind of jumping-off point we need in our social vision, and without such an analysis our critique of the injustices of society can only be arbitrary and groundless.

This problem can be seen in Michael Walzer's book **Spheres of Justice: A defence of pluralism and equality**.³⁷ While Walzer has independently developed a theory of the spheres of society which parallels that of Kuyper and Dooyeweerd in a remarkable way, he does not want to accept the kind of ontological basis for these spheres found in the neo-Calvinist tradition. Instead, he holds that the different spheres are the product of convention, social choice or social habit.

This cannot really explain the enduring nature of such spheres or their existence in widely diverse cultures and societies, and thus does not lead to any coherent account as to the nature of these spheres or their content.

Similarly Wolterstorff wants to retain the idea of spheres of society, but without the content or underlying theory of reality that Kuyper and Dooyeweerd have postulated. But such an approach leaves the whole theory hanging in mid-air, as it becomes then an arbitrary theoretical construct and not an empirically-based interpretation of the way we experience the world.

It is necessary to understand the structures of society in order to be able to discern both the way in which God has ordered the creation, and the way in which human sin has distorted and obscured that ordering. The consequence of such distortion is the denial of human rights and both personal and structural injustice. The nature of human rights and of justice as understood in the neo-Calvinist view of society will be the subject of the next chapter.

³⁷

See the review by Paul Marshall. *Anakainosis* 6 (1984) 4:20.

4. The nature of justice and human rights

One of the causes of injustice and violation of human rights in the world is that the structures of society are shaped by sinful human beings, and it is only with the redemption and reformation of these structures that justice will increase. However, Christians have been slow to develop theories of human rights that are undergirded by a Christian theory of society, rather than a humanistic perspective. It is only on a Christian basis that human rights can truly be established, since only a Christian theory can break through the idolatry of both individualistic and collectivistic conceptions of human life.

Those who see politics as a transient phenomena, i.e. Karl Marx, do not deal with justice. Those who do see it as continuing, i.e. Dooyeweerd, do deal with justice. That is, only a theory of society that gives a positive place to political life will bother developing a theory of justice. The Marxist view of politics is intrinsically negative, and so justice is of no interest. Also, the collectivist concept of society, as found in Marxist thought, has no place for rights which allow any areas of freedom for activities apart from those defined by central political authorities as socially desirable. Another reason why some political writers have little place for the concept of justice in their theory, for instance Hobbes and Marx, is because they have little place for norms, that is, some external standard by which the actions of the state can be judged. In a collectivist view, the state forms its own norms, that is, what is convenient for the state to hold, which ultimately perpetuates the power of those in authority regardless of rights. The collectivist view can then be ignored as unable, because unwilling, to grant genuine human rights to citizens. The main debate in Western thought is with individualistic theories.

Human rights – origin and theories

There has been increasing interest in the idea of human rights since the Second World War. A large part of this is tied in to the United Nations declarations on human rights, and this issue has become prominent in national and international politics, and political theory, in a way which was not the case prior to the war. The UN Charter is based on concepts of natural law, derived from the American constitution, which in turn is derived from Locke's theory. This theory is that by guaranteeing various human rights peace would naturally be the result.

The origins of our theories of human rights are older than that, however. For Aristotle, proportionality was the central element in justice. He also insisted that it was essential to avoid arbitrariness - which is impossible on that view. The general pattern is to approach justice negatively. Justice can only be just if it discriminates.

The emperor Justinian established the classical formula for justice: to render to each his due. This view predominated in western society until the seventeenth century when other views began to develop under the influence of Renaissance ideals. There are considerable problems created by this classical definition that defy resolution. They are:

- a) who are the "each"?

- b) who renders?
- c) what is due, right, fitting, etc.?
- d) how is this measured?
- e) how does one balance various dues?

Seneca developed the idea of the *lex aeterna* which was passed through Cicero to Augustine and Aquinas, where it was related to the *ratio* of God. The *Lex naturalae* is embedded in the *ratio* of humankind, and human reason was thought to participate in the *ratio* of God. State laws are positivisations of natural law, therefore unjust state laws have no real existence since they do not derive from the *lex aeterna*. Roman law was based on actions - rights were based on retribution and remedy for infringement of rights. They were not defined in themselves. Those who are trained in the Roman tradition, i.e. Afrikaans lawyers in South Africa, are thus weak on theories of public legal rights. This Stoic concept of a “law of nature” is a merely legal conception of existence. Human life is wider than its legal aspect.

The early Calvinist view

Wolterstorff suggests that the early Calvinist understanding of obedience was repressive, and though they spoke of justice, they failed to think through how they could live in a just society with those with whom they disagreed. This is partly a consequence of their continued acceptance of the Constantinian ideal: that the membership of the church and of the state was identical. However, Wolterstorff stresses that this failing was not unique to the Calvinists, either then or now. It was part of the way in which Western culture as a whole has seen the structure of society. Abandonment of the Constantinian model of society means accepting either a secularist view or a religiously pluralist view.

The secularist view

The secularist view is that religion is a private matter that can be and indeed should be excluded from public affairs. But this is not a correct understanding of the nature of religion as the fundamental directing force in human life, nor of the nature of the “private” and “public.”

The pluralist view

Pluralism on the other hand is the acknowledgment that people do have fundamental (and differing) religious commitments, and that these will work themselves out in every area of life. Therefore to impose a “secularist” view on society which expects personal religious commitment to remain in the background, on the spurious belief that it is of no direct relevance to daily life, is to violate the integrity and wholeness of human life. It leads only to fragmentation and inauthenticity, the kind of breeding-ground which fosters injustice.

John Locke

There were no genuine theories of human rights prior to John Locke, who was the first to write on human rights in a public legal sense. Earlier work on rights was on private legal inter-individual relationships, not state-citizen relationships. However, Locke's view was individualistic. The humanistic individualist approach to human rights means that they arise from human agreement and human will. Rights are what a person and other people agree they should be. Such rights stem from self-interest, not concern for the well-being of all. Rights are established because people believe they will personally benefit from doing so. Such rights arise not from the gift of God to ensure freedom to serve God and others, but from human desire, that is, as a sign of an individual's own power and autonomy.

As soon as such rights start to intrude on your desire to do something, they will be repudiated, and there is no basis in such a theory on which this can be challenged. Since rights are established to protect self-interest, if that understanding of what your self-interest is changes, then the rights change.

On a more sinister note, on this theory those who cannot assert their will, that is, have no way of expressing self-interest and claiming rights, are able to be denied their rights without retribution on those who deny them. This applies to the unborn, the young, the mentally incompetent and the aged. Rights then are denied to the weak and the powerless; an obviously anti-Christian perspective. Our concern with rights is not in the first place for our own self-interest and security, but with the desire to secure justice for all of God's creatures as an expression of God's love.

Natural rights views hold that rights are the basis of political power, so that governments have rights because they are the recipients of transferred natural rights (social contract theories). Rights and law-making competence are confused, and there is difficulty in accounting for how one person can have rights over another, resulting in a dialectic which alternates between justifying total authority for the state to protect rights or denying all authority to the state lest it invade rights. There is difficulty in such views in providing specifically political norms for **relationships** between people.

No definition of justice

Since justice is a norm for human life given by God, it cannot be exhaustively defined or grasped intellectually, in spite of the attempts from within the post-Renaissance rationalistic tradition to do this. In the reformational approach, the meaning of justice is primarily known within the context of the experience of justice, where we grasp something of the structural condition resulting from the God-ordained norm. The logical definition is only one way in which things can be known, and so such a definition can never grasp the totality of things. Justice therefore cannot be reduced to a definition, although definitions have their uses. But such definitions remain a secondary task to the concrete experience of justice which takes place in the fullness of life. The adequacy or

otherwise of such a definition with therefore be dependent on the orientation of one's life towards the God who established this world with a norm for justice.

The attempt to provide a criterion for rights from within the autonomous human will is the hallmark of humanism, and must inevitably fail since this basis is inadequate. The claim to have freedom from any limitation on the person apart from those to which they have agreed is self-contradictory, since an autonomous person cannot bind itself even to its own agreements, as that is an infringement from within, so there is no reason why such agreements should not be violated, including the violation of the freedoms of others. Only if freedom and rights are guaranteed by external norms can the human will be limited, and one person can claim rights which another must recognize. Rights are safeguarded only when they are founded on a divinely-established order. God's law does not violate human freedom, but makes it possible. We cannot claim rights by virtue of any intrinsic properties of human nature, but only by virtue of our unique covenantal relationship established by God with his human creatures. Because rights are God-given, their content cannot be determined by human desires or interests, but only by what God requires of human beings. Only on such a basis can justice be truly impartial.

The Scriptural view of rights

The Scriptural conception of what it means to be human is to live in community. It is only in communal life that we have rights, since it is only in communal life that rights are needed. To claim that we have rights, then, is an implicit rejection of the enlightenment ideal of the autonomous individual, and the attempt to ground human rights in an inherent dignity of the person, even by doing so in terms of "being created in the Image of God" must lead to incoherence and inconsistencies. A careful reading of Genesis 1 indicates that the "image of God" is not something inherent in individuals, but is expressed communally. Even other passages such as Genesis 9:6 place the image of God in terms of community, namely, the prohibition of murder, which is the ultimate violation of a relationship between people.

Rights are relational

If rights are privileges of being members of a community, then rights will bring people together rather than pull them apart. But grounding rights in human autonomy does not create community, or an obligation to meet the needs of others. If community is the necessary context for rights, then genuine allocation of rights will lead to the formation and strengthening of community. Thus communities as such have rights, since there are ways in which community cannot flourish simply through allocating rights to individuals.

A right is not subjective, something a person somehow owns, which must be given legal status. Rights are **relational**: I have no rights in and of myself, only in relationship to others. An isolated individual needs no rights! But because we are not isolated individuals, but persons in relationship, then we have rights in terms of proper relationship with others. We can talk about rights from the perspective of the individual, or from the perspective of the community of which they are a part, but we cannot talk about rights in isolation: rights exist only in relationship. The legal order does not create

things; it only establishes proper relationship between things, and so a right cannot be something owned or possessed; it can only be something to which we are entitled in terms of relationship with others.

This idea which grounds rights in communal relationships also leads to responsibilities as inherent in the granting of rights. Since rights are located in the context of relationships, that is in interdependence in community, then granting of rights results in the adoption of responsibilities for each other. This is in fact the basis of the granting of rights, which are one way in which the community carries out such responsibilities. Denial of responsibilities for others is in fact a denial of the possibility of the granting of rights. Governments can positivise rights through law-making, but they do not determine what rights are and so cannot allot rights arbitrarily or subject to political discretion. Rights are based on the creation order given by God, and the state can only ensure that such rights are recognised and protected.

No rights and legal status for institutions

One of the problems of Western liberal democracy is that rights and legal status are given only to individuals and not to institutions. For instance, a school has no rights, but the individuals who teach or study at the school do. This failure to recognise the rights of institutions causes many problems. The way this is addressed in law is usually by the “legal fiction” of considering these institutions as a “person” for purposes of law, e.g. commercial enterprises are “legal persons” in law. But institutions are not “legal persons” but “structured functional relationships” of persons and thus entitled to appropriate rights **as such** and not through a legal fiction. For instance, a **family** has the right to continued institutional existence, and cannot be torn apart by state decree or interference.

As a result of rights being relational and not inherent in the autonomous individual, any view which sees rights as pertaining to individuals cannot establish a just **society**. Justice is the character of a society in which there are proper relationships between its members. Granting rights to individuals in isolation leads to conflicts between members in society in actualising rights in an individualistic manner. This then leads to the attempt to “balance” rights between individuals so that one person’s rights do not infringe on another’s. But this then leads to conflict, because the idea of the individual with inherent rights does not have any natural limits to the rights that can be granted, and so infringements will inevitably eventuate. Rights are then located only in the context of relationships within society, and they are concerned with the establishment of proper relationships between individuals and institutions.

Kuyper’s view

Kuyper stood firmly against the concept of popular sovereignty, which he saw as a repudiation of the sovereignty of God. That does not mean that he denied human rights, since for Kuyper that selfsame sovereignty of God over all humankind guaranteed their equality. True human authority reflects and is rooted in the authority of God, and thus is the guarantee of basic human liberties. Nothing in God’s creation can of itself function as a source and centre of authority. All authority is given by God, and the diverse authorities

are correlated with the diverse tasks given by God and given institutional form in society, each institution with its own internal structure and task, and each with its own calling to fulfil and responsible to God for that calling (sphere sovereignty).

Human rights and justice not human conventions

Human rights arise from the order of creation and not from the state. They are therefore not “legal” rights but “human” rights, although they must be protected and enabled by legal means, as well as by other means, i.e. education, adequate income, etc. which are not legal in character but rights nevertheless. The state is uniquely qualified to ensure human rights as it is the only community which embraces all individuals within a territory regardless of their other communal functions. Human rights are at risk unless they are given legal status through the state’s positivising of law for them which makes them civil rights.

The competency of the state is to recognise the relationships between individuals and institutions in differentiated spheres of life. This does not mean the state defines rights **in relation to the state** but rights between individuals and institutions even when the state is not otherwise involved in that relationship. The state provides a basis for civil law that establishes a basis for claiming rights. In this way a just society can be formed.

Justice also is not a human convention but a norm established by God for human community. That is, it is a condition for the creation given by God, which enables human community to exist and which provides the standard which it is called to reach as a life-giving ordinance. It is not a static law or neutral measuring-rod; it is a divinely granted gift to human life and is full of the life of the Spirit, and not just a dead letter. This calling from God to do justice is a calling for responsibility. Human response to that calling is, however, frequently in rejection of that calling and is conditioned by sin. Justice is of **universal validity**. It impinges on every person, institution and community, in every circumstance and at all times.

The problem of basing a concept of justice on natural human rights is that the state cannot make rights but only recognise them. This restricts political action, since rights are prior to justice, and the content of justice is given by rights. So a situation which appears intuitively unjust, although fulfilling some concept of “rights,” is considered beyond the competence of the state to rectify. If normativity is centred on the individual person in this way, then rights theory is more geometrical in nature than juridical. That is issues such as “equality” becomes mathematical rather than juridical. If everyone has “x” amount of a right then “justice” is done, even if the consequences are intuitively unjust, because the equality between individuals cannot be derived mathematically. For instance, Michael Walzer asserts that equality is necessarily complex, that is, it includes different types of equalities and different things about which to be equal. He said: “No social good **x** should be distributed to men and women who possess some other good **y** merely because they possess **y** and without regard to the meaning of **x**.” Proper distributive principles thus vary within the different spheres of society. While Walzer does not use the neo-Calvinist concept of sphere sovereignty, using instead his own conception of different spheres, which is somewhat disjointed and arbitrary, the point he makes is well taken.³⁸

³⁸ Review by Paul Marshall. *Anakainosis* 6 (1984) 4:18-19.

There is general agreement about the meaning of “justice,” but disagreement as to what state of affairs is just. This disagreement is caused by the outworking of the content of justice and the relation of justice to norms. “Freedom,” “equality” or “freedom and equality” are seen as the norms for justice. However, even combining freedom and equality as the norms for justice does not manage to overcome the separate problems of what is freedom and what is equality. Freedom within the creation cannot be absolute, since the creation has a finite character, i.e. economic freedom has to deal with scarcity, that is, creational limits of supply. Freedom then is limited by the possibilities of the creation, and so the nature of creation as a given by God inherently impinges on all our discussions of freedom and rights, whether or not this is recognised. Human rights are thus rooted in the creation order, and the society which we form is shaped by the norms established by God in the creation which govern human life. That means that the diversity and complexity of human life must be recognised if justice is to be done, since God has created a diverse and complex world.

The problem of political rights and issues

One of the complexities of our modern world is the conflict between different groups contending for political supremacy. The cause of much of this conflict lies in the application of **non-political** factors to **political** issues. Thus in Northern Ireland, Lebanon, the republics of Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union, South Africa, as well as in Fiji, to mention a situation closer to home, conflict arises because political issues are being dealt with not according to **political rights** but according to some other **non-political** factor, in the cases mentioned often either religious affiliation or ethnic origin. This is a purely arbitrary and unjust approach to politics, which is not about the maintenance of the power of an ethnic or religious faction in society, but in the ensuring of justice for all regardless of religious or ethnic origin. From this comes the reformational insistence on a pluralist view of society. The idea that society is a monocultural entity was long ago rejected by Kuyper and his followers, and from their recognition that humankind has differing religious root commitments, leading to differing cultural expressions, came the insistence on granting legal recognition to that diversity, which is the heart of his doctrine of sphere sovereignty.

The “bi-cultural” approach taken in New Zealand still fails to recognise the non-political factors at work in what are essentially political debates. Maori and European population groups are not monolithic entities: within them there are Christians, pagans, humanist liberals, etc. who may have more substantial agreement with those of the same religious root commitment of another ethnic background than with those of the same ethnic background but of different religious commitment. Non-political factors, namely ethnic origin, are being used to determine political issues.³⁹ This is not to deny that Maoris as a group have suffered injustices in the past, with continuing ramifications in the present day. But those injustices were largely rooted in the use of this false principle, to decide political issues according to non-political factors, and to use that same principle to deal

³⁹ See for instance the recognition of this in the article “Ethnic groups funding criticised after education, health cuts.” *Otago Daily Times*, 8 June 1992.

with the problems does not redress the injustices but simply create new situations of injustice.

A Christian view on rights and justice

God has made of one blood all the nations of humankind. The common origin and unity of humankind is a basic Christian principle [Acts 17:26]. The use of ethnic, religious, or other non-political factors in determining the distribution of political power must inevitably lead to injustice, since these are inappropriate factors on which to base political action.

It is only within the community of human relationships that rights have reality and meaning, and it is only as we recognise the community of all human beings as God's creatures governed by the norm of justice that human rights will be honoured, and justice done to all without fear or favour.

The Scriptures teach that God loves justice (Isaiah 61:8, Psalm 37:28) and also *does* justice (Psalm 103:6, Psalm 140:12). According to Wolterstorff this is not a **retributive** justice that is grounded in God's anger over wickedness, as is held in some streams of Christian theology, but what could be called an **attributive** justice in which God's love of justice is grounded in his love for the victims of injustice.⁴⁰ Wolterstorff calls it a **distributive** justice, but in my opinion the term **attributive**⁴¹ is preferable as this view of justice is not concerned so much with apportioning to persons as with appropriating on behalf of them. Wolterstorff indicates his view concerns the ability of the weak to acquire what they need, and if they are not able to do so, it is incumbent on others to give it to them, which is indeed distributive. An attributive view on the other hand would be more concerned with granting the weak power to acquire what they need than providing them with their needs. Paul Tillich discusses the various aspects of justice based on the term "tributive."

Attributive justice attributes to beings what they are and can claim to be. Distributive justice gives to any being the proportion of goods which is due to him [sic]; retributive justice does the same, but in negative terms, in terms of deprivation of goods or active punishment. This latter consideration makes it clear that there is no essential difference between distributive and retributive justice. Both of them are proportional and can be measured in quantitative terms.⁴²

Paul Marshall

⁴⁰ Nicholas Wolterstorff. "Why care about justice?" *The Reformed Journal* 36 (1986) 8:9.

⁴¹ In using this term I am following Paul Marshall.

⁴² Paul Tillich. **Love, power and justice**. New York: Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 68.

Marshall suggests that the Greek and Roman concept of justice (*dike, ius*) are retributive in force, while the Hebrew concepts of *tzedekah* and *mishpat* are not. Dooyeweerd held that the concept in the Justinian code of “render to each their due” was based on the Greek and Roman ideals of justice, and is undoubtedly retributive.⁴³ But justice cannot originally have been retributive since this necessarily implies a reaction against a prior act, as do all words with re-, i.e. recompense, resolution, and restitution. Because the norms of God’s law which holds for the creation cannot presuppose the presence of sin (which only came subsequent to the creation) then justice must involve primarily attribution, a positive task, and only secondarily retribution, a negative one. The latter task of justice only came into being as a response to sin. It is not an unacceptable aspect of justice, since justice must inevitably involve punishment for wrongdoing, but it is a derivative task, not the primary task, of justice. In other words, the attributive task of justice is prelapsarian, while the retributive task of justice is postlapsarian. Justice then becomes a normative response to an anormative situation.

Herman Dooyeweerd and G C Berkouwer

Dooyeweerd stresses that the opposition to the idea of retribution in modern criminological thought is because it considers retribution to be “nothing but a residue of the unreasonable instinct of revenge.” The repudiation of the idea of retribution for this reason cannot be sustained, as it is rooted in the Enlightenment view that criminality must be treated rationally, while revenge is irrational.⁴⁴ Berkouwer points out that in Biblical eschatology the focus is not revenge but justice, even a retributive justice, even though there may be elements of revenge and resentment in the hearts of the oppressed and downtrodden who finally see their enemies, who are also the enemies of God, overthrown and judged.

In fact it is the Lamb of God who brings His healing order into the confusion of feelings in human hearts. If this is resentment, then Hannah’s and Mary’s songs of praise (1 Sam. 2:4ff; Luke 1:51ff) are also resentment, for both - through visionary illumination - sing of a radical turnabout in all relationships, of disarming and dethroning and exaltation; both reflect an eschatological outlook on the unveiling of reality as it is to the eyes of God. It is, of course, possible for the idea of retribution to arise in a perversion of this religion, but only if it has forgotten the meaning of the Lamb.⁴⁵

Berkouwer goes on to stress that to hold that the eschatological turnabout brought in by the kingdom is rooted in resentment and desire for revenge, is a brutalization and perversion of the Biblical eschatology. The theme of “the last shall be first” is not a

⁴³ Ibid., citing H Dooyeweerd. **A New Critique of Theoretical Thought**. Vol. II, p. 132.

⁴⁴ H Dooyeweerd. **A New Critique of Theoretical Thought**. Vol. II, p. 130.

⁴⁵ G C Berkouwer. **The return of Christ**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, p. 311.

“psychology of retribution” but the revelation of the true nature of things.⁴⁶ However, the justice of God cannot be held to be without the retributive element, since punishment of wrongdoing is inherent in maintaining justice.⁴⁷ But neither can the justice of God be understood as revenge, nor taken in a merely moralistic sense, isolated from his love, since there is no warrant in Scripture for such a view.⁴⁸ There is in Scripture ample basis for seeing retribution in the redeeming work of God.

Because God often does not operate according to retributive justice, sometimes complaints are raised against God. An example is found in the book of Jonah... Jonah wanted to see retributive justice carried out, but that was not the justice of God. Now, to be sure, we do find cases of God’s wrath and vengeance. But to understand this side of God’s justice, we need to see it in context. Shalom justice has two sides: aid for the needy is one; the other is the breaking of the power of the oppressor. For without judgement on the oppressor, how can the oppressed be freed? The wrath of God expresses the judgement of God against those who are oppressors, those who support an unjust status quo of no shalom... So, then, Scripture does contain the notion of God’s retributive justice, But, as in the examples above, it is often to be understood within the context of God’s shalom justice. For it results both in the punishment of those who maintain an unjust situation and in the redressing of the wrongs of those who cannot obtain justice because of their powerlessness.⁴⁹

Berkouwer points out that God’s justice is revealed in the cross, and that retributive punishment for sin is not essential for God’s justice to be manifest. In the cross we find grace and forgiveness, since there both the love and the justice of God are manifest, in that our sins are borne by the Redeemer, and the ungodly are justified.⁵⁰

The classical idea of retributive justice is derived from Greek concepts of natural law, an inescapable, unchangeable established order which impresses itself on human society. This natural law embraces all of reality, and human or positive law is an expression of natural law.⁵¹ This classical idea of retribution, however, is inherently different to the Christian conception that God punishes sin, that is, there is a retribution for those who

⁴⁶ Berkouwer, *ibid*, p. 312.

⁴⁷ Berkouwer refers to Proverbs 1:26, 22:8, Psalm 73:17ff, Romans 1:24-28, Hosea 10:13, Galatians 6:7-9, to indicate there is no reason to deny the concept of retribution. **Sin**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, pp. 375-377.

⁴⁸ G C Berkouwer. **The return of Christ**, p. 393. Cf. also Berkouwer, **Sin**, pp. 39-40.

⁴⁹ Perry B Yoder. **Shalom: The Bible’s word for salvation, justice and peace**. Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1987, pp. 35-36.

⁵⁰ Berkouwer. **The return of Christ**, pp. 394-395.

⁵¹ J Dengerink. **The idea of justice in Christian perspective**. Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1978, pp. 7-8.

violate the commandments of God, which cannot be understood as natural law, but only as God's covenant with his creatures. Thus there is a retributive aspect to God's judgement of humankind, but this is to be seen not as revenge but as desert based on the violation of the covenant thereby incurring the penalty for sin. Any rejection of a retributive moment in God's judgement is at odds with the Christian confession. God is the judge of all the earth who does right, and only God's justice is free from all partiality and desire for revenge.

5. The task of the institutional church in relation to the state

One of the problems which has plagued Western history is the conflict concerning ultimate sovereignty between the institutional church and the state. While in the early days of the church the conflict with the pagan Roman Imperium was with its claims to supreme sovereignty, the church rejected this claim and confessed the Lordship of Christ was supreme even over the emperor. This political claim resulted in the persecution of the church,⁵² which occurred sporadically until Constantine became emperor. But at no time had the church claimed sovereignty over the state. The conflict was over the claim that Christ was sovereign over the emperor, not that the church had sovereignty over the emperor.

Sovereignty of church and state

This distinction is important, since the mediaeval approach was that the institutional church, claiming to be the representatives of Christ on earth, claimed jurisdiction over the state. This was based on nature/grace dualism, a concept which continues to plague Christianity. In such a concept, the church is seen as the bearer of divine grace, and the remainder of society is a recipient of that grace only by means of the ministrations of the church. This was a result of the ecclesialisation of the kingdom of God and the usurpation of the sovereignty of God, so that the kingship of Christ over all of life came to be identified with the supremacy of the church over the rest of society.

The doctrine of sphere sovereignty provides the only way in which the impasse can be resolved. This does not subordinate the state to the church, nor subordinate the church to the state, nor artificially draw a boundary between them as in American jurisprudence, an approach which will always provide employment for lawyers because it is fundamentally incorrect in its basic assumptions, and anomalies must continually present themselves. The doctrine of sphere sovereignty rejects both nature/grace dualism and the basis on which the conflict between church and state is based: the contention for supreme control in society. This conflict arises from a false conception of the nature of the church and its role in society, and only by correcting our understanding in that regard can the problem truly be resolved.

The church

The church institution has frequently attempted to gain some kind of control over society through its official clergy, but the consequence of this has been nothing short of destructive for Christianity. By seeing the church institution as the means whereby the grace of God is made present in society, communicated through the ministrations of the clergy, wherever the church does not exercise its control, the grace of God is absent. Attempts to see the grace of God operative in society outside of the Church, while granting the continuation of the church in its present form, results not in the sacralisation of society but in civil religion and Deism.

⁵²

See Herman Dooyeweerd. **The Christian idea of the State.** p. viii.

The truth on which the role of the church is built is that God has no other mediator than Jesus Christ, and it is only through Christ that divine grace is made available to human beings. Outside of Christ there is no grace, no revelation and no redemption. God will not communicate with humankind apart from through Christ, and the attempt to develop some concept whereby divine grace is present apart from Christ, as for instance through other religions, is a distortion of the message of Scripture. The problem is not that God closes off vast areas of human life and huge numbers of people from receipt of his grace, as would be the case if this view were asserted from within the traditional understanding of the church. Rather, the problem is that it is assumed that the grace of God made available to all humankind through Christ, and through Christ alone, is restricted to the ministrations and control of the church institution. This false conception gives rise to both deistic concepts of the relationship of God to society, and the attempts to see the grace of God at work in other religions, so as not to exclude vast numbers of people from access to that grace.

But if we take seriously the Biblical teaching that God makes his grace available to us through Christ alone, and at the same time develop a truly Biblical understanding of how that grace is made available to the world, then these problems do not arise. Christ is king of the church. That much is true and generally accepted. Christ is king over all human society. That is also true, although not so widely accepted. But the problem has been in how this kingship over both church and human society is understood. In the Lutheran tradition, Christ rules the church as saviour-king, and rules in society in virtue of being creator. The conclusion of this two-realm theory, which is an attempt to integrate the evangelical understanding of the Gospel with the mediaeval concept of society, is that the church and the state are divorced from one another, and the Christian task in the sphere of the state is to choose the lesser of two evils, but whichever choice is made it is inescapably evil.⁵³

The neo-Calvinist concept

The neo-Calvinist concept, by contrast, holds that Christ in his office as king and redeemer is supreme over one world, one society, one humankind. But human beings are responsible to Christ as king and redeemer not only in their membership of the Church, but in every sphere of society. The distinction between church, state and other spheres, does not set up areas over which Christ has supremacy, while other areas are exempt from that kingship of Christ. Rather, it is a distinction which enables human beings to order their lives helpfully and fruitfully. Christ the Redeemer is king over human society: the whole of it, not only a part.

The task of the church is not to act as the realm of Christ's rule, from which divine grace "trickles down" to others, as wealth is purported to do in some demented economic theories. Rather, the role of the church is to proclaim the rulership of Christ and to make known the availability of divine grace directly to all human society through Christ. The church is the servant of the king, acting as his ambassadors and heralds. But instead, the

⁵³ For a contemporary Lutheran analysis, see Torliev Austad. "Attitudes towards the state in Western theological thinking." *Themelios* 16 (1990) 18-22.

church has often acted as if it were Christ's regents, with its officials ruling in his stead and seeking to see all human society come under their sway. Through this means, grace has been locked up within the church, and deprived from the rest of society, resulting in the secularisation of both church and society as a whole. Society is secularised, that is, cut off from God and considered to have independence and autonomy, while the church is secularised by seeking to remain relevant to this secularised society through adopting its agendas and programmes.

The state

The officials of the state, as much as the officials of the church, are alike and equally the ministers of God [Romans 13:4 (lit: deacons) and 6, 1 Peter 2:13-14]. They are not different in dignity or importance, but only in function. The officials of the church are charged with the proclamation of the Scriptures, making known and making clear to believers and unbelievers alike what God requires of us in every area of life. The officials of the state are charged with carrying out their task in ways which are consonant with the revelation of Scripture, as Romans 13 makes clear. The unbelievers, however, will not be aware of the requirements of God or the authority and responsibility delegated to them by God in this respect, and it is the task of the church to make this known.

Scripture is not a source-book for theology or a manual for devotions, but the covenantal document which reveals to us the nature of our relationship to God and the true meaning and reality of the world in which we live, a world created and sustained by God. That covenant between humankind and God is not a covenant for church life, but for human life in all its diversity, complexity and variety. The Scriptures have unfortunately been restricted to the sphere of the institutional church, with implications for life outside that sphere often limited to ethical issues only. But human life has an integrity and coherence which cannot be destroyed. We are not different people in the church than we are in the state or in the family or in business. We are whole human beings, whose lives cannot be carved up into bits. But we do live our lives within the orbit of different spheres of life, with differing tasks, responsibilities, opportunities and authorities. The doctrine of sphere sovereignty is the recognition of this fact, and an attempt to understand the simultaneous diversity and unity of human life.

The Scriptures as our covenant document address us as whole people, who have this diversity of tasks and responsibilities. They call us to allegiance to Christ in everything, submission to the lordship of Christ in the whole of life, and point to the renewal and recreation of that life in Christ as redeemer. That message of Scripture as revealing the covenantal nature of human life in all its fullness is the message given to the institutional church as its peculiar responsibility to proclaim.

The task of the church in relation to the state

What is the task of the church in relation to the life of the state? As church institution, the church must restrict itself to proclaiming the message of the covenant. But as body of Christ, it can and must engage in any and every area of life as ambassadors of Christ, bringing the light of God's word into their work and leisure. If we do not make the

distinction between the church as humanly-formed institution, i.e. a societal structure, and the body of Christ which incorporates all those who belong to Christ, from all ages and in all places, then we will end up identifying the church institution with the kingdom of God. The consequence of that is to see the church as the area of Christ's rule, while the rest of society is divorced or cut off from divine grace, and able to be a recipient of grace only through the mediation of that institution. The church as humanly-shaped institution limited to a particular time and place, does not encompass all believers even in that locality. Thus the task of the institutional church does not encompass the task of the community of believers.

But the doctrine of sphere sovereignty places all human institutions on a par; none is superior to any other, none is inferior to any other. All have their proper place in society, and all have their appointed tasks to fulfil. The grace of God comes to all of them equally, and none has any privileged access to God or to his blessings. It is as human beings in covenantal relationship with God that we receive his grace, not as members of any societal institution, including the church. While the church has as its special task the proclamation of the redeeming message of that grace, and ministers to the community of believers in sacraments and worship, that does not grant the church any privilege: it is a function it fulfils as God's servants, and any attempt to control the grace of God and restrict it to that institution results in transforming the church into an idol, and in the demonisation and secularisation of the rest of human life.

Nature-grace dualism isolates the rest of society from God's grace, seeing the church as the channel through which this comes. Thus society receives divine grace derivatively and not directly. The church is not the channel of grace, but the bearer of the message concerning that grace. The message of grace in the gospel brought to political life is not some kind of "social gospel" which makes the question of personal salvation in Christ irrelevant. Rather, that message of grace is a call to conversion and renewal of political life, individual and corporate, personal and institutional, in world-formative fashion. The gospel when brought into the sphere of political life remains unchanged; but the way in which that message is proclaimed and applied must be related to the hearers in ways they will understand and appreciate. But that is true of any proclamation of the gospel, not just in the political arena. Unfortunately our methods of evangelism are often identified with the gospel, and thus the enduring conflict, especially in evangelical circles, over whether "preaching the gospel" or "social action" has primacy, can never be resolved. The gospel is not to be identified with the evangelistic message, but rather is the good news of redemption in Christ which is the root of that evangelism, and at the same time that gospel is the root of social action. Thus evangelism and social action are related to each other not as competing and antagonistic activities, but as two fruits of the one root, the gospel of Jesus Christ. That gospel produces both fruit, and to neglect either one is to denature the gospel. Thus identifying the gospel with the evangelistic message leads to a world-denying message, as this is usually done within a dualistic framework that separates the "spiritual" life of human beings from their concrete, bodily existence.⁵⁴

⁵⁴

G C Berkouwer. **The Church**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976, pp. 411-413.

The Scriptures and political life

How then should the Scriptures be applied by the church to political life? Not in terms of a domineering church institution dictating its wishes to a subordinate state, as in Mediaeval Catholicism, a view not yet extinct. Not in terms of a church hierarchy that addresses what it perceives as political issues that trespass on the jurisdiction of the church, or for instance in reproving the government for its social welfare policies because of the detrimental effects on the disadvantaged. The political implications of the Lordship of Christ demand that the church strives for the world dominion of its Lord: a mandate given by Christ himself when he said before his ascension:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age [Matthew 28:18-20].

This world dominion of Christ is to be distinguished from the exercise of ecclesiastical power, since this dominion of Christ cannot be delimited in any way, as the power of the church most certainly is. The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to integral involvement with all of life. Abraham Kuyper's most famous phrase was that "There is not a single inch of which Christ the Lord does not claim as his own." Thus the dominion of Christ cannot be excluded from any area of human life, politics included, and the task of the church is, as Christ commissioned it, to call all people back to recognition of the universal Lordship of Christ and to submit to his rule in everything. The task of the church then is to call everyone to join us in submission to Christ, not to call them to submit to us in the church.

The task of the church is also to pray for those in authority, and thus political concerns immediately enter into the liturgy of the church. This task cannot be carried out meaningfully if there is no sound conception as to what the responsibilities of those in authority are. Similarly the injunction of Paul in Romans 13:1-7 to respect the government and pay taxes impinges directly on our Christian discipleship,⁵⁵ as these authorities are ordained by God. In our prayers then we acknowledge God as supreme governor of human life, who has delegated his authority to human beings to exercise on his behalf.

To refuse to bring the Word of God to bear on political life through the preaching, teaching and liturgy of the church is to seize control over the Word and muzzle it, and to usurp the sovereignty of God who addresses us in our political lives through that Word. This then keeps Christ from what is rightfully his, namely the submission of his people to the Word in political life, and prevents them from carrying out their task of bringing that word for political life to those outside the church. The reason this happens is not because the church is apolitical, but because it is politicised by its members who will not allow their own political opinions, practices and ideals to be scrutinised in the light of the Word

⁵⁵ Zuidema suggests that in completing our tax forms we are directly confronted by King Jesus.

and to be judged by Christ, who alone has supreme authority over political life. It is a result of church members taking a profane political stance who do not want to be exposed to the Truth concerning politics in the liturgy and teaching of the church. Any acquiescence to demands from such members to cease confronting their political convictions with the Word of God has at that point exchanged the Lordship of Christ for the domination of his disobedient disciples. As a result politics enters the church and controls the Word of God, and the rights of Christ in the Church, as well as in political life, are denied to him.

The political task of the church institution is the proclamation of the Scriptures as Word of God to human life, a covenantal message that encompasses all that we do, and therefore directly addresses political life as such. The bearing of the Scriptures on political life is not an arbitrary exercise, subject to the personal inclinations of the preacher, as though there is the need for an artificial connection to be made. The political import of Scripture is already present in the text, and it is the task of the preacher to make that import plain and understandable to their audience.

Justice and the Word of God

The kingdom of God is manifested in the state as righteousness in the administration of justice through the establishment of human ordinances. The administration of justice ought to take place in the general interest: this is the supreme task of the state, and to this task the church must address its political message. The Scriptures provide the only basis for justice in human life, and provide their own inherent critique of humanistic and pagan concepts of justice. By calling the state back to its true task and proclaiming the genuine character of justice, the church fulfils its task with relation to the state. More than this it is not permitted to do. But the issue of justice pervades all of political life, since it is the characteristic responsibility of the state. The need for just laws, just administration and courts, just policies with regard to every area of life in which the state can legitimately legislate, and the proper boundaries of the state's action, beyond which it must behave unjustly, because it is being untrue to its calling, are all part of the message of the gospel which the church institution legitimately brings to the state.

However, there is still the problem of how this is to be done. Is it right that the church hierarchy should haul the government into church and reprove them from the pulpit for their political failings, as was done not too long ago? Should the church use its voice in preaching to promote one or other political philosophy? Much of the reflection on this issue is centred on the church institution and its appointed officials (the clergy) and their task in this regard. But is that the correct situation? I believe not. It is not the task of the clergy to directly involve themselves in political action of this sort **as clergy**. As private citizens they may certainly act politically, but as officials of the church institution, appointed to proclaim the Scriptures and administer the sacraments, to conduct organised worship, and maintenance of the life of the community of God's people through teaching, pastoral care, discipline and love, this falls outside their competence. For them to act politically as clergy is a species of clericalism, the identification of the task of the church

with the work of the clergy, and the identification of the body of Christ with the church institution and its task.

The task of the institutional church

The task of the institutional church is the proclamation of the whole message of Scripture to its members, the members of the body of Christ, those who live in obedience to the covenant between God and humankind, in faith and repentance. As these people live out their lives in every area, that faith and repentance, their living in terms of the covenant relationship with God that encompasses all that we do, will work itself out in politics to the extent that these people are involved in political life. The message of Scripture for political life is not a message of either praise or condemnation for elected politicians, but a message of life in Christ, political life included, for every single person. However, not all people have the same involvement and same responsibilities in political life.

Therefore, to direct this message to some and not to all distorts the proclamation of Scripture, which is a covenantal document for all God's people. Rather, what the preacher must do is proclaim the message of Scripture concerning justice in such a way that it can be applied responsibly by each person with respect to their individual responsibilities. The alternative is to misuse Scripture to point the finger at politicians and allow the congregation before us to feel justifiably self-righteous because they are not like these tax-collectors! Instead the political message of Scripture cuts to the heart of every individual who hears it and calls all of us to pursue justice and love mercy in our own lives regardless of whether or not we hold an appointed or elected political office.

The church is not the clergy, but the people of God, called to live out their lives in terms of our covenantal relationship with God. That relationship comes to fruition in whatever we do, and the Lordship of Christ finds its expression through the subjection of all of human life to his divine word and renewing grace. The grace of God brings renewal and prosperity into human life not by means of the church but directly as Christ rules and directs all humankind. The clergy have the task of teaching and exhorting the people of God, helping them to understand the message of grace and applying it in their lives. But the work of the church is not to do that application on their behalf. The people of God must be brought to maturity so that they can profitably bring the Scriptures to bear on their own lives, whatever they are doing, and not to have to depend on the clergy to do it for them. The people of God have to learn to act responsibly as citizens of the kingdom of God in every area of life, and those with political tasks must learn how to express that citizenship in their tasks.

Concluding remarks

The Scriptures speak directly to political life, and through reading the Scriptures with eyes open, not as a source for theological axioms or devotional comfort, then we see the covenantal history of the people of God, faltering, slipping, repenting, falling again and repenting once more, striving in their own way to give expression to the call to do justice in their lives, and showing how the revelation of God's requirements concerning justice are ignored, heeded or imperfectly followed. In all this, we see the grace of God at work, reproving, rebuking, punishing, prospering, blessing and cursing, as the need arises. God is in dynamic relationship with his people, calling them on towards the goal he wishes

creation to fulfil, and adjusting his approach to them according to their response. Sometimes he repents of the evil he had intended because of human sin and injustice, sometimes he repents of the good and withdraws his blessing. But at all times God works with us, in us and sometimes against us, depending on how we respond to the covenantal relationship he has established with us, ever redeeming, renewing and completing the creation he has made, so as to arrive one day at the full expression of the glory of God, in political life as much as any other area. The kings of the nations will enter Jerusalem bringing with them the wealth of their realms (Isaiah 60), and then, the prophet says, all the people will be righteous, and they will possess the land forever.

By proclaiming the Scriptures as covenantal history, that is as the history of the covenant in which we are full partners, and heirs together with the patriarchs and kings, mothers in Israel and sons of the prophets, the apostles and women-witnesses to the resurrection, then we will see the relevance of the Scriptures to our daily lives. It is only as a covenantal history of God's redemptive acts, which provides also for our redemption, that Scripture can be brought to bear with integrity on our lives, since it is only in this way that Scripture addressed the nation of Israel, and the infant church, the new people of God. Our redemption stands in direct continuity with theirs, and Scripture is our covenant document as much as theirs. By proclaiming this covenant, the lordship of Christ the king over the whole of creation, we can bring that gospel message to bear on political life without distorting or manipulating the Scriptures, since in this way it does already address political life, and must be proclaimed in that way in order to speak on its own terms into our political life. Only then will we truly see the kingdom of God rise up in our midst.

John T McNeill has made the comment that "there has been in this century no adequate attempt on the part of the churches to confront the nations and the world with a Christian political philosophy."⁵⁶ I contend to the contrary that in the thought of Kuyper and Dooyeweerd we have such a Christian political philosophy. Our responsibility is to make it known and through Christian political involvement to bring the light of Christ to the nations, a light which can dispel the darkness in political life as well as in every other area of human endeavour.

⁵⁶ John T McNeill. "John Calvin on Civil Government." In: **Calvinism and the Political Order**. George L Hunt, editor. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965, p. 44.

Bibliography

- Bainton, Roland H. **Christian attitudes towards war and peace: a historical survey and critical re-evaluation**. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960.
- Bammel, E & C F D Moule. **Jesus and the politics of his day**. Cambridge: University Press, 1984.
- Bebbington, D W. **The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics 1870-1914**. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982.
- Berg, F Vanden. **Abraham Kuyper. A Biography**. St Catharines: Paideia, 1978.
- Berger, Peter L & Richard John Neuhaus. **To empower the people: The role of mediating structures in public policy**. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1977.
- Bready, J W. **England, before and after Wesley**. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938.
- Chaplin, J. **Dooyeweerd's theory of public justice**. Toronto: ICS.
- Chaplin, John. **The Gospel and Politics: Five Positions**. Toronto: ICS.
- Clouse, Edmund (ed.). **War: Four Christian Views**.
- Dengerinck, J. **The idea of justice in Christian perspective**. Toronto: Wedge.
- Dooyeweerd, H. **The Christian idea of the State**. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972.
- Fogarty, Michael. **Christian democracy in Western Europe 1820-1953**. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul (1957).
- Fowler, Robert Booth. **A New engagement: evangelical political thought, 1966-1976**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.
- Gibbs, Mark. **Christians with secular power**. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. Laity Exchange Books Series. 1981.
- Goudzwaard, Bob. **A Christian Political Option**. Toronto: Wedge.
- Goudzwaard, Bob. **Idols of our time**. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1984.
- Harper, W A & T.R. Malloch. **Where Are We Now? The State of Christian Political Reflection**. Washington: University Press of America, 1981.
- Hempton, David. **Methodism and politics in British Society**. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984.
- Hilton, Boyd. **The Age of Atonement. The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785-1865**. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.
- Hopfl, Harro. **The Christian polity of John Calvin**. Cambridge: University Press, 1982.
- Howse, Ernest M. **Saint in politics: the "Clapham Sect" and the growth of freedom**. London: George, Allen and Unwin, 1971.

- Hunt, George L, Ed. **Calvinism and the political order**. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965.
- Hunter, James Davison. **American Evangelicalism: conservative religion and the quandary of modernity**. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983.
- Hutchinson, William R. **Between the times: the travail of the Protestant establishment, 1900-1960**. New York: CUP, 1989.
- Irving, R E M. **Christian democracy in France**. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973.
- Irving, R E M. **The Christian democratic parties in Western Europe**. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979.
- Langley, McKendree R. **The practice of political spirituality: episodes from the public career of Abraham Kuyper, 1879-1918**. Jordan Station: Paideia, 1984.
- Lyon, David. **Karl Marx: A Christian appreciation of his life and thought**. Surrey Hills: Anzea, 1979.
- Machen, G I T. **Politics and the churches in Great Britain 1869-1921**. Oxford University Press.
- Maier, Hans. **Revolution and Church: the early history of Christian democracy, 1789-1901**. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965.
- Marshall, P & E Vanderkloet. **Foundations of Human Rights**. Christian Labour Association of Canada.
- Marshall, Paul. **Thine is the kingdom: a Biblical perspective on the nature of government and politics today**. London: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1984.
- Mouw, R. **Politics and the Biblical Drama**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976.
- Mouw, Richard. **Called to holy worldliness**. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. Laity Exchange Books Series. 1980.
- Mouw, Richard. **Political Evangelism**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976.
- Mouw, Richard. **When the kings come marching in: Isaiah and the new Jerusalem**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. "Why wait for the kingdom? The theologian's temptation." *First Things* May 1990, 13-21.
- Reid, W S. **John Calvin: His influence in the Western world**. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982.
- Runner, H E. **Scriptural religion and political task**. Toronto: Wedge.
- Schouls, Peter. **Insight, authority and power: a Biblical appraisal**. Toronto: Wedge.
- Sider, Ronald. **Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger**. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1977.
- Silver, Morris. **Prophets and markets: the political economy of ancient Israel**. Kluwer: Boston, Nyhoff: The Hague, 1983.

- Skillen, James W. **International politics and the demand for global justice.** Burlington: G R Welch, 1981.
- Spykman, Gordon. “The principled pluralist position.” “The principled pluralist major response.” In: **God and politics: four views on the transformation of civil government.** Gary Scott Smith, ed. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1989.
- Storkey, A. **A Christian Social Perspective.** Leicester: IVP.
- Van Der Hoeven, Johan. **Karl Marx: The roots of his thought.** Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1976.
- Van Riessen, H. **The society of the future.** Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1957.
- Vandezande, G. **Christians in the crisis: Towards responsible citizenship.** Toronto: Anglican Church Bookcentre, 1984.
- Wolterstorff, Nicholas. **Until Justice and peace embrace.** Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983.
- Wright, C J H. **Living as the people of God: The relevance of OT Ethics.** Leicester: IVP, 1983.
- Yoder, John Howard. **The Politics of Jesus.** Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972.