

"Christian Politics and the Principle of Sphere Sovereignty"

Bob Goudzwaard

From Chapter 18 "Christian Politics in a Global Context" in James W Skillen and Rockne M McCarthy eds **Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society** Scholars Press, Atlanta, pp. 333-354.

This selection is a translation of "Christelijke Politiek en het Principe van de 'Souvereiniteit in Eigen Kring'" *Anti-Revolutionaire Staatkunde* March 1977 trans and edited by Harry der Nederlander with Gordon Spykman pp. 335-342

The gospel will continue to have political significance as long as it is preached and people are willing to receive it as a message of salvation. To illustrate the truth of this assertion, Professor Van Niftrik once pointed out that on the day of Christ's resurrection the disciples were gathered behind closed doors and windows because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities. Although they had no intention of engaging in politics, this gathering of that [336] small group of fearful disciples was seen as a political act by their enemies. Accepting the message of the gospel is a religious and a personal fact, but it is also a social and political fact. It brings us into a new relationship with God, but also with our fellow men in every aspect of our lives.

The meaning of the gospel of Christ is not just an inner question, but also a matter of outward renewal. Its meaning is not limited to the salvation of the soul, but also extends to the body. It is related not only to a new heaven, but also to a new earth. In his pamphlet, "Christ and Social Problems", published in 1895, the same conviction led Abraham Kuyper to complain bitterly about the prevailing sermons in the church of his day. He said, "They constantly remain caught up in the spiritual, continually plodding around in the same circle of ideas, and in doing so they neglect to preach the full Christ, whose gospel so clearly shows that he also wished to influence the life of society, that he condemned society as it was, and wished to sanctify it to be something better." The gospel of Christ does indeed prompt us to a renewal of our thinking about social and political matters.

As we all know, the history of attempts by Christians to arrive at this renewal of political thought spans several centuries. In that history we encounter, among other things, the principle of sphere sovereignty. This principle was, as it were, an echo within political thought of a deep biblical truth, namely, that we ought to obey God rather than man. Therefore, so this principle argues, no human institution has the right to lay a total claim on human life. Human institutions are authorized to lay their claim upon us and exercise authority over us only within their own sphere.

We find the kernel of this concept of sphere sovereignty already present in the time of the Reformation, namely, in Calvin's discussions of the civil state. However, only with the Christian statesman Ernst Ludwig von Gerlach and the Dutch political leader Groen van Prinsterer does it receive a more structured delineation and elaboration. In the January 5, 1871 issue of *Dutch Reflections* [*Nederlandse Gedachten*], Groen cites von Gerlach approvingly when the latter says that "God's law does not stand alongside of or under the spheres of diplomacy, politics, and war but embraces these spheres with its sovereign authority as it does that of private life. God's law, therefore, is their supreme guideline." Von Gerlach also says, "Natural needs and wants ... must submit themselves humbly to the holy majesty of God's commandments, which every child learns at school but whose depth and height no human mind can fathom." As is clear from his famous inaugural address, "Sphere Sovereignty", given at the Free University in 1880, Kuyper embraced this common heritage of Calvin, von Gerlach, Althusius, and Groen van Prinsterer.

[337] We, however, are living now in the late twentieth century. The realm of political activity has reached a level of complexity in our time that Groen and Kuyper in their day could hardly have imagined. Not only has the complexity of political life increased, so also has the interlacement of political life with all other domains. Especially in social-economic affairs the spheres of government and business have influenced one another strongly. The state has taken upon itself considerable direct economic responsibility, and government is deeply involved in numerous social and economic matters. This automatically raises the question: Has not the concept of sphere sovereignty been rendered wholly obsolete by the developments of our time? To even broach the topic at

this time seems clearly out-of-date. Is it still meaningful to speak of distinct authorities that must be respected in their own spheres, whatever these spheres may be? Nowadays the principle of sphere sovereignty is either not mentioned at all or it is used, it seems, only by the committed proponents of almost total state non-intervention. The principle of sphere sovereignty seems to have developed into a sort of holy haven for those Christians who cannot keep up with the pell-mell pace of our civilization. It seems to be a concept fit only for people who, for example, want to interpret every effort by workers for a share in management as a violation of the employer's God-given authority. Because of all this, we are tempted in our time to proclaim the complete bankruptcy of this principle, a principle that once was one of the most important expressions of a uniquely Christian politics. This does, however raise a question. If it is true that the principle of sphere sovereignty was once a product of genuine biblical thought, can such a principle then become completely outworn and outmoded by historical developments? In my opinion a good principle is valid not simply as long as circumstances permit but forever. But if this affirmation is true, only one possibility remains; namely, that this principle has gradually become outdated through a series of distorted interpretations. Perhaps our own ideas and interpretations have spoiled its original meaning and thus deprived us of an insight that would serve us extremely well in approaching the complex reality of our day.

I will therefore, now attempt quite deliberately to remove the dead husk surrounding this almost forgotten concept of Christian politics and seek anew the living kernel beneath all the scholastic layers of dirt and paint which in the course of time have obscured it.

A Threefold Misinterpretation

To this end, I draw your attention to a possible threefold misinterpretation of the principle of sphere sovereignty, viewed in terms of its origin. In [338] the first place, there is the misinterpretation that would turn a norm-oriented principle into one oriented to authority. Secondly, there is a misinterpretation that would turn an appeal to a dynamic calling into a static barrier. Thirdly, there is a misinterpretation that would apply this principle one-sidedly, namely, only to the government's authority over society.

In other words, I wish to present the principle of sphere sovereignty as a principle that is by its very nature norm-oriented, one in which the dynamic calling of government and society in their mutual interrelation comes to expression. In so doing, I wish to distance myself from every viewpoint that sees this principle as a static rule that demands from all existing authority relationships in society a one-sided respect for government.

1. Norm versus authority

The contemporary interpretation of the principle of sphere sovereignty is especially slanted toward respect for external authority. When this principle is under discussion, for example, it is customary to point out the necessity of fully respecting all expressions of the employer's authority and of the authority of business in economic life in general. This authority - these powers or offices - must always be respected in what they do.

Respect for authority is indeed something good. In its proper context it can even be a biblical demand. It is also true that the principle of sphere sovereignty has everything to do with differences in human office. But is respect for every given authority indeed the historical core or root of this principle? I doubt this very much, and I do so on what I consider good grounds.

The word "sphere" is certainly important in this connection. A characteristic of every sphere or circle is that it cannot exist without a center. What is this center according to Kuyper and Groen, for example? Is this center some human - though God-given - authority? Then this authority would be the thing to which every sphere of human life owes its peculiar character and from which it derives its peculiar inner coherence. This sounds too fantastic to be true, although I will admit that sometimes Kuyper sounds as though this is what he means.

The center of every sphere of life, the source of its own unique coherence, is naturally not the existence of human authority, but the existence of divine norms characteristic for that sphere. Groen van Prinsterer expressed this when he spoke of the

validity of God's law for every sphere of life. With strong approval he quotes von Gerlach's statement that God's will encompasses all human spheres with a sovereign authority that acts as their supreme guideline. This divine - "sovereign" - authority is the center of every sphere [339] of life. Only when this divine sovereignty is no longer acknowledged do the various spheres lose their inner coherence and unity.

This may seem to be quibbling, especially in view of the numerous problems of contemporary social and economic policy. But it isn't. For example, in discussing the participation of workers in the management of an enterprise, if we follow the authoritarian interpretation of the principle of sphere sovereignty, then all such claims must be seen as a challenge to God-given authority and must, therefore, be repudiated as an attack on the sovereignty of that enterprise. If it is true, however, that God's norms for economic life form the basis of its sovereignty, one implication of this principle may well be that we should strenuously promote the co-responsibility of workers in business. For if stewardship is God's norm for all of economic life - and it is - then it is the calling of every enterprise to become a genuine institution of stewardship. This is a calling in which all working people must share, in keeping with their occupations.

Professor P. S. Gerbrandy, prime minister of the Netherlands during World War II, and a committed advocate of worker participation, once put it this way: "In the life of the nation the principle of sphere sovereignty, originally Christian, is being perverted into a sort of employer sovereignty which excludes the participation of all others. The characteristic thrust of this principle, however, is right - namely, the sovereignty of divine ordinances in a given sphere, before which both employer and worker, both government and people must bow." From a Christian viewpoint it is indeed unthinkable that authority should ever be allowed to exist in a normative vacuum, and that it should be viewed as something that ought to be revered as an end in itself, without, without taking into account the way this authority is exercised. Such modes of thinking seem rather to derive from humanist notions of autonomy. In interpreting the principle of sphere sovereignty we must proceed from divine norms which enable us to understand the limits of human authority, rather than proceeding from human authority which would make the latter into an unlimited term.

2. Dynamic versus static

This conclusion, however, brings us to a second misunderstanding of the principle of sphere sovereignty, namely, that which interprets it as a static barrier instead of a dynamic calling. A static barrier, a line of defense against all government interference - this is the primary political conclusion which follows when the principle of sphere sovereignty is transposed into a principle of unlimited respect for authority. Then indeed every government measure relating to the market mechanism and free enterprise stands as an attack [340] on the sphere sovereignty of the enterprise. But can we draw the same conclusion if we proceed from the normative interpretation of the principle of sphere sovereignty?

The question is almost rhetorical. For it is true that the primary norm for every government is to do justice in all matters of public concern, and if it is also true that no industry may set aside the command to act as a genuine steward, it is then clear that if the employer does not act as a good steward, it may be a matter of just governmental action to bring it back to its original calling. Radical intervention by government in social and economic life may then be necessary. Preventing industry from severely polluting our environment, for example, is a matter of public justice. Legislation to prevent such pollution is, therefore, not a violation of the principle of sphere sovereignty; on the contrary, the latter demands such legislation. In this way the government restores public justice to the economy and it does so on the grounds of a deep respect for the unique norm of economic life, namely, the norm of stewardship. For stewardship presupposes that every enterprise should demonstrate direct concern for its natural environment. When the government drives irresponsible enterprises back to their calling, it expresses not a desire to destroy the sphere sovereignty of free enterprise but a desire fully to honor it.

It should be obvious that in this way the principle of sphere sovereignty does not work as a static barrier but as a spur to a dynamic interpretation of the calling of government and business.

In our time we see that through the continual influence of a one-dimensional,

materialistic lifestyle, industries often lack completely the dimension of human values in the work environment and display shortcomings with respect to normative economic behavior towards their consumers, their employees, and toward the well-being of their natural surroundings. Instead they are often nothing more than institutions which pour out the greatest possible stream of consumer goods - industrial sites for combining the factors of production. Is this a salutary existence in accordance with God's norms for economic life, norms that speak of service to one's neighbour, of work fit for people created in the image of God, and of the mandate of stewardship? Of course not. As long as, or as soon as free enterprises are unable or unwilling to open themselves up to these norms for their own sphere, and in doing so cause harm to citizens' legitimate interests, government must intervene to correct the public derailment of these private enterprises. The government will even have to create the public conditions to prod and stimulate every enterprise to open itself up to genuine obedience to these norms of stewardship. Contemporary government has a pre-eminently dynamic calling to pro- [341] -mote in its own way - that is, in a just way - the sphere sovereignty of free enterprise and to do so by directing it to economically responsible behavior toward nature, out of consideration for our fellowmen, with an eye to scarce natural resources, and in service of society as a whole. The closed tunnel of employer behavior must be opened up. Trampled grass must be given a chance to recover. For God's norms - not our own cheap one-dimensional desires - must be sovereign in economic life.

3. Two-sided versus one-sided

I wish to close my essay by pointing to a third misunderstanding of the principle of sphere sovereignty, namely, that this principle can and must function in only one direction, that is, as a means by which to protect private offices in society from acts of public agencies.

Perhaps this statement flabbergasts some. Is it possible in this matter also to turn the question around? Is it possible to speak of the necessity of asserting the sphere sovereignty of the state over against the actions of private enterprise? This idea would seem to be applicable only in times of bitter revolution, and, therefore, very remote from

our wealthy, civilized western world.

At this point, too, I wish to stress how important it is to understand sphere sovereignty as a norm-oriented principle if it is to speak effectively. The state is not an end in itself. The government has the divinely imposed duty to obey the norm of justice in all matters of public interest. This means, however, that it must also have the real possibility to act and react in accordance with that norm. For if citizens impede government in carrying out its task justly toward society, this in fact constitutes a direct assault upon the unique sovereignty of the state. Yet this is precisely what happens in many cases in our modern society. Think of the way that pressure groups try to turn the power of the government into an extension of their own private interests. Or of the techniques used to turn a president into a commercial product that can be sold to the people. And, not least of all, I remind you of the rise in our time of a type of government which is no longer grounded in striving for justice but in seeking endless compromises, which means attempting to divide the booty among the economically powerful and leaving the weak and small to toddle along in the rear. Here, if anywhere, we see a blatant challenge to the sovereignty of biblical norms for the public actions of government. For the central obligation of every government is precisely to protect the weak and to defend the powerless.

A totalitarian state is a demonic thing. It openly ignores the fact that God has given unique norms for family life, for economic life, and for social life, and that in all these spheres people live *coram Deo*, directly before the face of [342] the living God. He is the only One who has the right to lay a total claim on our lives; therefore, a state that tries to do so is demonic. It thereby tries to take the place reserved for God alone. This, however, should not lead us to the conclusion that the only real danger of totalitarianism comes always and solely from the state. This danger can also come from so-called free enterprise when it systematically attempts to make the government an extension of its private, commercial interests and when it continuously tries to transform the family into a platform upon which it can dump an endless stream of consumer goods, even when the cost of it is nothing less than a perpetual steam-rolling of current consumer tastes in conformity to the model of its latest advertising campaigns. For what

do you think the future is for the unique spheres of government and family in a society whose only hope of happiness is the increase of material welfare and power? I tell you that in the end all these institutions will then be transformed into growth-machines, into institutions that are forced to serve that central goal of our life. They will then lose almost entirely their full diversity of character. For wherever norms lose their authority within the distinct spheres of life, the unique character of each of these spheres will then also disintegrate. We can be crushed by a totalitarian society, but we can also create one ourselves.

Conclusion.

Two conclusions may be readily drawn from this entire argument. The first is that the manner in which we are inclined to interpret the principles from which we profess to proceed is more important than those principles themselves. In current interpretations of the principle of sphere sovereignty, also in contemporary American literature, the deepest motives are often more humanistic than Christian, often oriented more to human autonomy than to a consciousness of norms, often directed more to our economic advantages than to the duties of stewardship.

My second conclusion is that, resting upon its biblical foundation, the principle of sphere sovereignty has not only retained a certain validity, right up to the present day; but, although nearly forgotten, it has now perhaps reached its point of highest urgency: for we live in a Western culture that in its reductionistic materialism, with its whittling away of all differences, is close to becoming totalitarian.