

SUBSIDIARITY AND SPHERE-SOVEREIGNTY: A MATCH MADE IN . . . ?

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The principle of subsidiarity has a parallel in the Dutch Calvinist tradition of Abraham Kuyper. Seeking to create space for intermediate entities between the state and the individual, Kuyper developed the idea of "sphere-sovereignty" to express this. While the two principles are parallel, there are differences regarding the nature of each sphere, their interrelationships, and the role of the institutional church. Nevertheless, the combined strengths of these principles are instructive for those seeking to witness to Christian faith in all areas of contemporary, pluralistic societies.

THE QUEST FOR A CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ORDER has long occupied the church. What should a Christian society look like? Is there such a thing as a Christian society, or might there potentially be many Christian societies? What is the role of the church, state, and other institutions in society? Everyone from Diggers and Dominicans, to Cistercians and Calvinists, has variously defined answers to these questions. To say that there is variety in both definitions and practice hardly captures the wide range of options that have grown within the church. Yet, amidst this diversity, two significant traditions, the Roman Catholic and Dutch Calvinist, have converged in surprising ways within the last century and a half.

While the theology of the Roman Catholic Church has always had a social component, its official social teachings, so defined, are often dated from Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* of 1891. Leo believed that the increasingly secular European states were pushing the church out of civil society. Hoping to reassert the church's authority and role, Leo addressed the social issue of the laboring class of Europe. The second tradition, Dutch Calvinism, has also reflected on issues of church, state, and secularization. The teachings of this tradition are not formal teachings of the highest church official, but theological reflections on issues of the day by its church

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leaders. Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), a leading theologian in this tradition and prime minister of the Netherlands, developed a social-theological model he called “sphere sovereignty.”¹

There are a number of reasons why these two traditions are parallel and warrant further investigation. The origins of each lie in post-Enlightenment Western Europe of the late 19th century. Both attempt to respond to the political changes in the church/state/society relations of that period. By this time, the medieval guilds had disappeared. In their place was the contractual agreement between corporations and labor. In this context of industrialization, class conflict was a common characteristic of European society. A watchword of the French Revolution, “no God, no master!” still resonated in Europe. The revolts of 1848 were still living memories, and Marx’s call, “Workers of the world to unite!” was well known and often heeded. It seemed that the individual stood alone before the state, or industrial capitalist, with few intermediate bodies between. Religion was shoved into a spiritual corner, and governmental elites expected the church’s silence or complicity in social issues. In response to these conditions, both church traditions were compelled to articulate new approaches to the social order. The Catholic Church in many instances had been a state church that now found itself pushed from its earlier prominence. On the other hand, Kuyper’s church, *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*, seceded from the national *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* in protest over state regulation of ecclesiastical affairs.

Today, the conditions that led these traditions to develop social theologies have changed, but recent conflicts may have made resolution of issues of church, state, and society more vital than ever. The question of how religion can and should function in pluralistic societies arises in many hotly debated political issues today: homosexual marriage, abortion, education vouchers, etc. In other parts of the world, blood is spilling over the question of whether a religion should direct the state. It thus seems imperative that the church continue to develop approaches that honor the role of faith in society, while recognizing the plurality of powers and voices within society. By a “pluralistic” social model I mean an ordering of society in which neither church, nor state, nor individual, nor marketplace sets the standard or holds controlling authority within that society. Rather, a pluralistic society permits diverse groups and institutions to operate within a common societal framework.

In this article I hold the social theology of both Catholic and Reformed Churches up to the other’s light, permitting each theology to illuminate

¹ See Abraham Kuyper, *Sovereiniteit in eigen kring: Rede ter inwijding van de vrije Universiteit den 20sten October 1880 gehouden in het koor der nieuwe kerk te Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: J. H. Kruyt, 1880).

previously hidden features of the other. I focus on the lesser-known Kuyperian perspective, look back to the origins and development of the key principle of each approach—namely, subsidiarity and sphere-sovereignty, document some critiques of subsidiarity made by advocates of sphere sovereignty,² and make comparisons at a number of points. I conclude with questions that have arisen as well as prospects for future collaboration. As both subsidiarity and sphere sovereignty are living traditions, my survey will necessarily trace movements, rather than capture moments. The fact that they are living traditions, however, permits and perhaps demands that they continue to shape the lives of their respective faith communities.

THE CATHOLIC TRADITION OF SUBSIDIARITY

According to *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, “the principle of subsidiarity is broadly concerned with the limits of the right and duty of the public authority to intervene in social and economic affairs.”³ It is a principle that cuts in two directions. From the bottom up, so to speak, it insists that individuals and lesser communities within society are responsible for their own appropriate functions and that larger institutions such as the state must not interfere with or absorb the lesser.⁴ From the top down, however, subsidiarity acknowledges that higher authorities such as the state may intervene among lower in order to “encourage, stimulate, regulate supplement and complement” them, that is, render *subsidiuum* or aid.⁵ The principle of subsidiarity thus does not permit all aspects of society to be absorbed into the state but does encourage an active state within society. Subsidiarity is named as such and articulated by Pius XI in 1931 when he declares in *Quadragesimo anno*:

It is an injustice and . . . a disturbance of right order to transfer to the larger and higher collectivity functions which can be performed and provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies. Inasmuch as every social activity should, by its very nature, prove a help [*subsidiuum*] to members of the body social, it should never destroy or absorb them. The state should leave to other bodies the care and expediting of matters of lesser moment. . . . The more faithfully the principle of subsidiarity is followed and a hierarchical order prevails among the various organizations, the more excellent will be the authority and efficiency of society. (nos. 79–80)⁶

² I find no specific critiques in the other direction—of sphere sovereignty by Catholic subsidiarists.

³ R. E. Mulcahy and T. Massaro, “Subsidiarity,” *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. 567.

⁴ Pius XI, *Quadragesimo anno* nos. 79, 80.

⁵ John XXIII, *Mater et magistra* no. 53.

⁶ Throughout, I use the translations of papal documents found in David J. O’Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, ed., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis 1992).

A number of comments are appropriate regarding the context for and purpose of this teaching. First, Pius wanted to reiterate and extend the teaching on social and economic issues initiated by his predecessor Leo. At a time when Mussolini's fascist regime pressured Pius and the church to retreat to "spiritual" matters, Pius reasserted the importance and legitimacy of the church's social role.⁷ Second, Pius asserted that spiritual renewal itself is a necessary condition for social reform. As Christine Firer-Hinze comments, "If the evils besetting modern society are to be cured, and genuine peace—which encompasses both justice and charity—attained, God's reign must be restored to the heart of each person *and* to the heart of familial, political, and economic life."⁸ Pius was not content to "let the church be the church," as ethicist Stanley Hauerwas seems to suggest. Instead, he wished to transform diverse structures of the social order in such a way that each order of public life would be transformed both materially and spiritually. With this articulation in *Quadragesimo anno*, subsidiarity becomes a fundamental tenet of Catholic social teaching.

Long before this clear enunciation of the principle, however, one can find foundations for the principle of subsidiarity in the church. Franz Mueller finds such precursors in the writings in Ambrose, Chrysostom, Theodoret, and Augustine that safeguard the autonomy of smaller groups and individuals within the greater organism of society. Mueller observes that these Fathers "devoted detailed studies to this analogy: man is created and destined for social life; in human communities there is need for authority and differentiation; the 'members' must, as in the case of the natural body, have different functions, rights and duties; the equal and the unequal must join in God-intended harmony and order."⁹ John Kelly traces this path as it continues through Aquinas. Following Aristotle, Thomas held that all things have an immanent purpose that was divinely implanted. For Thomas, "God not only causes creatures to be. He causes them to be in the specific ways in which they exist and orders them to their specific goals."¹⁰ These specific goals exist at different levels. Human creatures, for example, have goals in common with other creatures—self preservation; with ani-

⁷ See also Paul Misner, "Catholic Labor and Catholic Action: The Italian Context of *Quadragesimo Anno*," *Catholic Historical Review* 90 (2004) 650–74.

⁸ Christine Firer-Hinze, "Commentary on *Quadragesimo anno*," in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries & Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes et al. (Washington: Georgetown University, 2005) 151–74, at 153.

⁹ Franz H. Mueller, "The Principle of Subsidiarity in the Christian Tradition," *American Catholic Sociological Review* 4 (1943) 144–57, at 145.

¹⁰ John E. Kelly, "The Influence of Aquinas' Natural Law Theory on the Principle of 'Corporatism' in the Thought of Leo XIII and Pius XI," in *Things Old and New: Catholic Social Teaching Revisited*, ed. Francis P. McHugh and Samuel M. Natale (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1993) 104–43, at 108.

mals—sex and food; and with other rational beings—the search for truth and community. These various levels of goals exist in subsidiary relationship to one another; the lower levels of human society are taken up within the higher. Mueller says, “St. Thomas states that *una congregatio vel communitas includit aliam*, i.e., one social body (‘congregation’) or community includes another, naturally smaller one, as in a system of concentric circles. This applies to both secular and sacred association.”¹¹ This concentric ring of lesser societies grows naturally from one to the next, each building upon or supporting the other. Thomas used the example of a family growing to a village, and then to a city and a principality.¹² When functioning harmoniously, this ordering of society permits each person to fill his or her particular goals at appropriate levels. This set of relationships is discernible via the natural law. We see, then, that subsidiarity is not a novelty with *Quadragesimo anno* but has roots in the Fathers and especially in the natural law tradition of Aquinas.

Though the principle of subsidiarity has thus been inchoately present throughout the church’s history, it is widely conceded that Bishop Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler of Mainz brought this idea forward into modern Catholic social teaching in the 1850’s.¹³ William Hogan observes:

Ketteler pointed back to the Middle Ages when the autonomy of spontaneously formed social groups, such as towns, guilds, and religious associations, were not mere creatures of the state, but were real entities anterior to the state. Bishop Ketteler taught 19th-century clerics and laymen that “the state had the duty of furnishing by means of legislation the necessary assistance to the working class in organizing a corporative structure in which the new corporations would enjoy autonomy within their respective spheres.”¹⁴

It is likely due to Ketteler’s influence on Leo XIII that we find the concept of subsidiarity seminally present in *Rerum novarum*, where Leo writes, “The law must not undertake more, nor go further than is required for the remedy of the evil or the removal of the danger” (no. 29). Leo XIII’s *Immortale Dei* (1885) also suggests the principle of subsidiarity—for example: “Even in physical things, albeit of a lower order, the Almighty has so combined the forces and springs of nature with tempered action and

¹¹ Mueller, “Principle of Subsidiarity” 147. The citation from Aquinas is *In IV. Sent.* d. 25, q. 3, a. 2, q. 3, sol. 3.

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 3, q. 8, q. 1, ad 2.

¹³ See Paul Misner, *Social Catholicism in Europe: From the Onset of Industrialization to the First World War* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

¹⁴ William E. Hogan, *The Development of William Emmanuel von Ketteler’s Interpretation of the Social Problem* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1946) 80–83. Cited in Kelly, “Influence of Aquinas’ Natural Law Theory” 119. See also Marvin Krier Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third, 2001) chap. 1.

wondrous harmony that no one of them clashes with any other, and all of them most fitly and aptly work together for the great purpose of the universe” (no. 14).

Yet, as noted above, the definitive statement employing and describing the principle of subsidiarity in Catholic social teaching was written by Oswald von Nell-Breuning and promulgated by Pius XI as *Quadragesimo anno*. There Pius responded to the conditions that European and American believers faced during the Industrial Revolution and the Depression. While addressing economic concerns in detail, the real bedrock assumption behind *Quadragesimo anno* is anthropological.¹⁵ The whole person must be able to pursue his or her goals within society, and these certainly included the economic aspect of life. Speaking of *Quadragesimo anno*, Thomas Kohler notes:

Since spirit and body are co-principles in the constitution of the person, no such distinction (that the church’s place in society is confined to the spiritual realm) can be made. The temporal and spiritual have a mutually conditioning effect on the person, who exists as an inseparable whole. Consequently, everything that touches upon the well-being of the person is of interest to the church. . . . Its function is not to govern but to advise and offer commentary on the arrangements by which we order our lives.”¹⁶

This was Pius’s goal for subsidiarity—the full development of the human person within a system in which the person can flourish. He believed that, due to the Industrial Revolution and the Depression, these purposes of human existence had been abrogated by an economic system that pitted employee against industrialist. He thus proposed a “corporatist” solution that would include intermediary associations that would enable people to fulfill their various goals. These associations, largely trade-related groups, would have semiautonomous status vis-à-vis the state.¹⁷

The principle reappears in *Mater et magistra* (1961) and is again applied to economic matters. Here, Pope John XXIII shows his desire to protect individuals against interference by higher collective groups, but he also insists on the need for larger groups to support the lesser. He argues that, in economics, lower and smaller entities such as individual men or firms are

¹⁵ “The encyclical’s core concern, however, is with the sorts of social institutions that are most conducive to the full development of the human personality. In a world increasingly dominated by large and often state-controlled institutions, the encyclical seeks to carve out the grounds for authentic individual self-determination” (Thomas C. Kohler, “In Praise of Little Platoons: Quadragesimo Anno (1931),” in *Building the Free Society: Democracy, Capitalism, and Catholic Social Teaching*, ed. George Weigel and Robert Royal [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993] 32).

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 41.

¹⁷ *Quadragesimo anno* nos. 81–95.

the proper origin of business ventures.¹⁸ Nevertheless, greater corporate entities must increase the output of goods produced and see to it that they are used for the common good. John XXIII explains this relationship with a reference to subsidiarity. "This intervention of public authorities that encourages, stimulates, regulates, supplements and complements is based on the principle of subsidiarity as set forth by Pius XI in his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*"¹⁹ (he then quotes the passage from *Quadragesimo anno* nos. 79, 80). Later, without mentioning subsidiarity by name, John XXIII recognizes the increasing complexity of social life and expresses his wish that *all* social organizations contribute to the common good. The greater public authorities should understand the common good and direct the intermediate and smaller social groups toward it. Individual members of society can then be encouraged and enabled to "achieve their own perfection," as they participate in larger social groups.²⁰

When addressing the issue of poverty in less developed nations, John XXIII urges that those in authority help the poor to help themselves. He here combines the principle of "solidarity" with that of subsidiarity. Given our solidarity with others of the human race, he argues, we owe them our help as fellow members of the human family. Expressions of this solidarity, however, are to be formulated from the bottom of the subsidiarity pyramid, with individuals helping first themselves and then their nearby communities. The pope writes:

Hence, those also who rely on their own resources and initiative should contribute as best they can to the equitable adjustment of economic life in their own community. Nay, more, those in authority should favor and help private enterprise in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, in order to allow private citizens themselves to accomplish as much as is feasible.²¹

In *Pacem in terris* (1963) John XXIII applies the principle of subsidiarity to the international community, urging that international relations also be guided by the principle of subsidiarity. By this he means that, as national governments direct smaller organizations within their nation toward the common good, so too should international bodies direct national governments toward the common good of people worldwide.²² John XXIII goes on to say that he does not wish to supplant the responsibilities of individual national authorities but judges that only a worldwide authority can create the conditions in which individual nations can prosper and pursue their true common good.

¹⁸ *Mater et magistra* no. 51.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* no. 53.

²⁰ *Ibid.* no. 65.

²¹ *Ibid.* no. 152.

²² *Pacem in terris* no. 140.

In the 1980s the U.S. Catholic bishops applied the principle of subsidiarity to both the content and the production of church social teachings when they published *The Challenge of Peace and Economic Justice for All*. In preparing these statements, the bishops followed the principle of subsidiarity by including listening and working sessions within a number of dioceses and congregations. The content also reflected significant influence of *Quadragesimo anno* and later reflections on subsidiarity. For example, *Economic Justice for All* states:

Catholic social teaching calls for respect for the full richness of social life. The need for vital contributions from different human associations—ranging in size from the family to government—has been classically expressed in Catholic social teaching in the “principle of subsidiarity” [quoting *Quadragesimo anno*]. This principle guarantees institutional pluralism. It provides space for freedom, initiative, and creativity on the part of many social agents. At the same time, it insists that all these agents should work in ways that help build up the social body. Therefore, in all their activities these groups should be working in ways that express their distinctive capacities for action that help meet human needs, and that make true contributions to the common good of the human community. (Nos. 99–100)

Later in the document, the bishops specifically name intermediate structures such as families, neighborhoods, and community and civic associations that link individuals to their societies. All together contribute to the creation of the common good (no. 308). In light of their understanding of subsidiarity, the bishops also express regret that there is no international organization with the authority to promote economic justice at the international level (no. 323).

In 1991, on the 100th anniversary of *Rerum novarum*, John Paul II issued his encyclical *Centesimus annus* on economic justice, applying the doctrine of subsidiarity in a way that both strengthens the role of the individual and establishes the limits and responsibilities of state action. Emphasizing the creativity and responsibility that each individual person has, the pope writes:

The role of disciplined and creative *human work* and, as an essential part of that work, *initiative and entrepreneurial ability* becomes increasingly evident and decisive. . . . Indeed, besides the earth, man’s principal resource is man himself. . . . It is his disciplined work in close collaboration with others that makes possible the creation of ever more extensive working communities which can be relied upon to transform man’s natural and human environments (no. 32).

Turning toward global responsibilities and connections, John Paul II emphasizes that we are all part of one human family, and insists that we cannot be indifferent to the plight of any family members. He cites biblical examples such as Cain’s question about being his brother’s keeper, the parable of the Good Samaritan and the judgment scene in Matthew 25 to

show that our common human nature demands acts of mercy and justice toward others.

John Paul II also clarifies the role of the state in four ways. First, stronger nations must provide opportunities for smaller ones in the international arena, including its economic life (no. 35). Second, the state may not become totalitarian, absorbing many of the functions of the intermediary groups (nos. 13, 45). Third, the state must step in to fulfill crucial roles when other social sectors are not equal to the task at hand. This type of state action, however, must occur on an *ad hoc* basis, and not be permitted to take over the roles of intermediate groups (no. 48). Finally, while constantly vigilant to promote the common good, the state is not responsible for all goods. Smaller groups such as individuals, families, and businesses are prior to the state and responsible for the good of their own sector of social life (no. 11).

The way the church viewed its own social teaching has also undergone considerable development. In *Rerum novarum* the papacy makes some rather extravagant claims for itself,²³ which Nell-Breuning described as “exceedingly arrogant.”²⁴ By the time John Paul II celebrates the 100th anniversary of *Rerum novarum*, however, the attitude has become far more modest. He views the social teaching of the church as a “treasure that has been passed down” and seeks to mine that treasure for the betterment of church and society (no. 3).

John Paul II extended and clarified the social theology begun in the late 19th century. Commenting on the advantages of subsidiarity, so articulated, in contemporary pluralistic societies, Brian Stiltner notes:

The plurality of associations is a consequence of human finitude and a guard against hubris. In sum, pluralism is central to the common good because different communities center on the pursuit of different components of the complex human good; because institutional diversity facilitates extensive participation in social life [a strong element of the Catholic component of the good society is, after all, justice as participation]; and because no one association can claim to be a perfect community.²⁵

In the Catholic Church’s teachings on subsidiarity, I find two important themes. The first is that of “greater and lesser.” It emphasizes a hierarchical principle in which greater associations support the lesser and permits lesser associations to accomplish smaller tasks. As the principle develops

²³ See *Rerum novarum* no. 16, for example.

²⁴ Cited in Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching* 23.

²⁵ Brian Stiltner, *Religion and the Common Good: Catholic Contributions to Building Community in a Liberal Society* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999) 178. Cited by John A. Coleman, S.J., “The Future of Catholic Social Thought,” in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching* 522–44, at 528.

from *Mater et magistra* onward, the church clarifies the roles that greater authorities should play in the lives of the lesser, “encouraging, stimulating, regulating, supplementing and complementing” (*Mater et magistra* no. 51). In *Economic Justice for All*, the types and nature of the associations themselves are expanded. Not only are greater institutions such as church and state mentioned, but also explicit reference is made to intermediary groups such as “families, neighborhoods, church congregations, community organizations, civic and business associations, public interest and advocacy groups, community development corporations, and many other bodies.”²⁶ The state is the regulator and aid of the smaller groups, and each smaller group has its own area of responsibility. This theme places associations in order by size and relates greater size with greater authority.

At the same time, I hear a second theme that speaks more of *teloi*. Following Aquinas, the church argues that each creature has its own divinely appointed reason for existence. The good for that creature is that it fulfills its own *telos*. Given the differences among creatures and people, there must be a wide range of *teloi*. Even within each person, there are various *teloi*. Subsidiarity encourages each distinct being, and perhaps each intermediate institution, to achieve its appropriate end. When each part does so, it contributes to the good of the whole or the common good. Thus, while the vertical and hierarchical viewpoint of subsidiarity plays the melody, this horizontal element functions as its counterpoint. The entire *subsidiuum* is geared to the common good, as each individual or group achieves its own good within the good of the whole. The picture in the principle of subsidiarity is thus one of complementary associations of varying sizes working together in solidarity for the common good. It is this goal—the common good—that gives subsidiarity its focus.

ABRAHAM KUYPER AND SPHERE SOVEREIGNTY

Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) was a theologian, an orator, the editor and founder of a daily newspaper and a church weekly, the founder and president of a university, member of parliament, prime minister of the Netherlands (1901–1905), and father of eight.²⁷ In his lifetime, he shaped

²⁶ U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All* no. 308.

²⁷ Numerous works have appeared on Kuyper’s life. The classic biography is by P. Kasteel, *Abraham Kuyper* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1938). Good recent works in English include Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper’s “Lectures on Calvinism”* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998) and John Bolt, *A Free Church A Holy Nation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001). A review of recent literature on Kuyper can be found in James D. Bratt, “In the Shadow of Mt. Kuyper: A Survey of the Field,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 31 (1996) 51–66.

the nation of Holland, and since his death, his writings have continued to wield influence in the Netherlands and other countries influenced by the Reformed tradition. As a scholar Kuyper developed the theory of “sphere sovereignty,” and as a politician he attempted to put it into practice in approximate concurrence with the papacy of Leo XIII. Of course, Kuyper was not speaking and writing as a prince of the church; thus his work on “sphere sovereignty” does not have the official status that subsidiarity does. Nevertheless, his writings have created their own tradition in Christian social theology.

In Kuyper’s thought and practice, Christian faith, economic theory, and political policy must be consciously interrelated. Similar to Leo XIII, Kuyper would not permit the “religious” to be sidelined to a spiritual realm. For him, the spiritual and the social must be of a piece. Princeton ethicist Max Stackhouse notes how Kuyper’s approach integrates society, individuals, and Christian morality.

[Kuyper] held that it is a serious error to say that Christianity has, or should have, no implications for the organization of the common life or that it pertains only to spiritual yearnings seated in the heart or expressed in the privacy of the prayer group; or that society is best ordered by a secular, pragmatic politics that avoids religions wherever possible. On the contrary, the well-being of the soul, the character of local communities, the fabric of the society at large, and the fate of civilization are intimately related and cannot be separated from theological and moral issues.²⁸

Before delving into Kuyper’s theological and political theory I must briefly consider the context in which Kuyper’s thinking grew. Kuyper was the son of a Calvinist pastor but migrated intellectually into Ritschlian liberalism,²⁹ which was then predominant in northern Europe, while pursuing his doctorate in theology at Leyden. He went on to pastor a rural congregation and, while serving a church in Beesd, was “converted” by his peasant parishioners to a more orthodox form of Calvinism.³⁰ Throughout his career as both a theologian and a politician, Kuyper would navigate between the poles of his more liberal teachers and his more conservative church members. He found the theology of the former, at day’s end, to be

²⁸ Max Stackhouse, preface to *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper’s Legacy for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Luis Lugo (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000) xi–xviii, at xiii.

²⁹ Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889) was perhaps at the pinnacle of the German liberal Protestant tradition. His use of historical-critical methods led him to have little faith in the historical and metaphysical claims of traditional orthodoxy.

³⁰ James Bratt recounts this in “Abraham Kuyper: His World and Work,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998) 1–16. This change occurred for Kuyper in 1863–1867.

groundless, and the social policy of the latter fruitless. He searched for a pathway that would be faithful to his now orthodox faith and yet effective in the advanced and pluralistic society of the Netherlands. His career in both politics and theology, therefore, moved between these positions, sometimes chastening one or the other, and sometimes forming alliances with them. Interestingly, he did form political alliances with the Dutch Catholics, who shared many similar concerns and inclinations. In fact, his ascendancy to prime ministry of the Netherlands would not have occurred without them.³¹

Like other intellectuals within the broader European community in this period, Kuyper's social and political theories correspond to his nation's situation and ambitions. In very broad terms, two routes predominated in late 19th-century Europe. The first was an autonomous individualism ensuing from the French Revolution. This polity asserted absolute rights for the individual and rejected any interference from other powers not authorized by the individual—especially the church and the monarchy. The other option was a unifying German idealism. In this polity, the nation was seen as one spiritual and racial unity that was then expressed in a form of state socialism. The first (French) option Kuyper called “Popular Sovereignty” and the second (German) option he labeled “State Sovereignty.”³² He rejected both.

In rejecting the Germanic state socialist option, Kuyper (in a mix of metaphors) wrote: “The state may never become an octopus, which stifles the whole of life. It must occupy its own place, on its own root, among all the other trees of the forest, and thus it has to honor and maintain every form of life which grows independently in its own sacred autonomy.”³³ James Skillen, a political theorist in the Kuyperian tradition, describes Kuyper's critique of state socialism:

Kuyper used the term “organic” together with the idea of diverse spheres of society, to affirm the social character of human life, with its built-in obligations of mutual accountability, trust and service. Kuyper's critique of socialism, in both its social democratic and state socialist forms, warns of the danger of reducing society to the state or the state to society. The organic character of society can be truly healthy and just only when its real diversity is preserved.³⁴

³¹ See Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation* for both a depiction of Kuyper's political thought and practice and an attempt to put Kuyper's thinking in dialogue with contemporary Evangelical public theology.

³² Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1931) 78–109.

³³ *Ibid.* 96.

³⁴ James Skillen, introduction to Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, trans., ed., and intro. James Skillen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1991) 21. See also

For Kuyper, the state is not the totality of society, nor is it the final power in society. Instead, it is the regulative institution within society that respects and adjudicates among the roles and authorities of other parts of the organism. David H. McIlroy finds this specification regarding the roles of the state to be the chief contribution of sphere-sovereignty. He notes that for Kuyper “the state has a threefold role: (1) the recognition of the sovereign spheres, (2) support of the sovereign spheres, and (3) resolution of conflict between the sovereign spheres.”³⁵ Kuyper also rejected popular sovereignty, declaring:

In the Christian religion, authority and freedom are bound together by the deeper principle that everything in creation is subject to God. The French Revolution threw out the majesty of the Lord in order to construct an artificial authority based on individual free will. . . . The Christian religion seeks personal human dignity in the social relationships of an organically integrated society. The French Revolution disturbed that organic tissue, broke those social bonds, and left nothing but the monotonous, self-seeking individual asserting his own self-sufficiency.³⁶

For Kuyper, popular sovereignty—“no God, no master!” meant that the human person asserted his or her own self-sufficiency, and that the social good was thus merely a composite of each individual’s good, never a common good that could reach beyond the individual.

In lieu of either popular sovereignty or state sovereignty, Kuyper proposed his model of “sphere sovereignty” in 1880.³⁷ Significantly, he made this proposal in his speech at the inauguration of the Free University of Amsterdam, a university that Kuyper expressly founded to be “free” from both ecclesiastical and civil control. Using the Calvinist doctrine of Common Grace, which holds that God shows his goodness in all of creation, Kuyper asserted that all social institutions and intellectual pursuits are divinely ordained. There is a divine order in all spheres of life. God’s grace and thoughts are to be found not only in the salvific work of Christ but also in all aspects of creation:

If thinking is first in God, and if everything created is considered to be only the outflowing of God’s thought so that all things have come into existence by the Logos—i.e., by divine reason or, better, by the Word—yet still have their own being, then God’s thinking must be contained in all things. There is nothing in the

James Skillen and Rockne McCarthy, ed., *Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1991).

³⁵ David H. McIlroy, “Subsidiarity and Sphere Sovereignty: Christian Reflections on the Size, Shape, and Scope of Government,” *Journal of Church and State* 45 (2003) 754.

³⁶ Kuyper, *Problem of Poverty* 43–44.

³⁷ Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* 461–90.

whole creation that is not the expression, the embodiment, the revelation of a thought of God.³⁸

Each sphere of life thus reflects the presence of the Word of God and is directly responsible to God for its being and its continued existence. Each sphere was created by that Word and forms part of the continuously developing order of creation. The legitimacy and role of each sphere is thus not derived from either state or church, but directly from God, whose creative initiative brought it into being and sustains it. “Thinking God’s thoughts after him” then becomes the task not only of the theologian but also of every believer in every sphere of life. Writing of these spheres, Kuyper is nearly grandiloquent:

There are in life as many spheres as there are constellations in the sky and the circumference of each has been drawn on a fixed radius from the center of a unique principle, namely, the apostolic injunction *hekastos en toi idioi tagmati* [“each in its own order”: 1 Cor. 15:23]. Just as we speak of a “moral world,” a “scientific world,” a “business world,” the “world of art,” so we can more properly speak of a “sphere” of morality, of the family, of social life, each with its own *domain*. And because each comprises its own domain, each has its own Sovereign within its bounds.³⁹

Explicating this concept of sphere sovereignty, reformed theologian Gordon Spykman writes: “Each sphere has its own identity, its own unique task, its own God-given prerogatives. On each, God has conferred its own peculiar right of existence and reason for existence.”⁴⁰ Reformed philosopher and Fuller Seminary President Richard Mouw elaborates on “sphere sovereignty”:

Kuyper is not merely interested in strengthening mediating structures; he also wants to understand how these so-called mediating structures are themselves organizational manifestations of more basic spheres of interaction. For him, it is important to see the ways in which, say, familial relations are very different from ecclesial ones, or how artistic activity differs from scientific investigation. . . . Whether it is good to have Rotary Clubs and Parent Teacher Associations is not as important a question for Kuyper as whether art and religion and business and family life are granted their allotted place in the God-ordained scheme of things.⁴¹

All things are allotted their particular spaces in Kuyper’s sociopolitical model, and the whole “scheme of things” is divinely ordered. There are not

³⁸ Kuyper, “Common Grace in Science,” in *ibid.* 443.

³⁹ Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in *ibid.* 461–90, at 467. Kuyper’s exegesis of this text is a bit of a stretch, but I cite him on this point to show his understanding of what he called the “creation order.”

⁴⁰ Gordon Spykman, “Sphere Sovereignty in Calvin and the Calvinist Tradition,” in *Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. David Holwerda (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1976) 167.

⁴¹ Richard Mouw, “Some Reflections on Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life* 87–109, at 91.

“spiritual” spheres and “secular” spheres. Rather, all human efforts to develop culture are at once both spiritual and natural.

In a sentence Kuyperians are fond of quoting, Kuyper says: “No single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”⁴² For Kuyper, each sphere of life has its own legitimacy and its own nature, and participants in each sphere daily respond to Christ’s claim as its Lord in either belief or unbelief. Thus no sphere is more spiritual or noble than any other. Whether it is in family life, economic life, churchly life, sports, or any other sphere, each person can fulfill the “cultural mandate” to “till the earth and keep it” (Gen 2:15). Human beings, as God’s image-bearers, use their unique creative gifts to work within different spheres, in accordance with their talents and with respect to the nature of each particular sphere. Society’s accumulation of these labors then results in diverse human cultures.⁴³ Thus human work, when properly directed, has positive social and cultural results. It also has profound religious goals—the glorification of God and service to neighbor.

The task of believers in all walks of life, then, is to exercise their calling within their chosen sphere(s) of work. It may well be that individuals do participate in multiple spheres of life. Using an example from art history, James Bratt writes:

Kuyper would shudder at both the subject and style of Picasso’s definitively modernist *Les Femmes d’Alger*, but he would envision their more seemly counterpart, the Calvinist matron, as simultaneously a family member, reader, believer, consumer, patriot, teacher—each role having its own independent integrity, all cohering together in her subjective being.⁴⁴

At the center of her subjective being would be her faith, since all of life is an outworking of one’s basic religious commitment. As Skillen comments, “For Kuyper, religion is not one thing among many that autonomous people choose to do; it is, rather, the *direction* that human life takes as people give themselves over to the gripping power of either the true God or false gods.”⁴⁵ All of life thus ultimately becomes service either to God or to false gods.

⁴² Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty” 488.

⁴³ As Reformed theologian (and my uncle) Henry Van Til stated: “Culture, then, is any and all human effort and labor expended upon the cosmos, to unearth its treasures and its riches and bring them into the service of man for the enrichment of human existence unto the glory of God” (Henry Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1959, 2001] 29–30).

⁴⁴ James D. Bratt, “Abraham Kuyper: Puritan, Victorian, Modern,” in *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life* 3–21, at 14.

⁴⁵ Skillen, introduction to *Problem of Poverty* 17; emphasis added.

Kuyper grounds his proposal for the inviolable legitimacy of each sphere, as well as the legitimacy of state power, by tying both to his belief in the absolute sovereignty of God:

From this *one* source, in God, *sovereignty in the individual sphere*, in the family and in every social circle, is just as directly derived as the *supremacy of State authority*. These two must therefore come to an understanding, and both have the same sacred obligation to maintain their God-given sovereign authority and to make it subservient to the majesty of God.⁴⁶

The church, for Kuyper, shapes the basic faith convictions of the believer, which in turn serve as guide for the other spheres of life. Faith, for Kuyper, is not only the acceptance of a set of revealed truths but also the foundation upon which a worldview is constructed. He does not contrast a realm of faith with a realm of reason but compares different “faiths” to one another, or contrasts faith with unbelief. For Kuyper, “faith is the function of the soul by which it obtains certainty.”⁴⁷ It is the ground of certainty that makes all other knowing possible. The role of the church is therefore crucial. The church elucidates and strengthens this faith, which serves as the believer’s basis for determining the direction of his or her life in other spheres.⁴⁸

As noted above, the believer could simultaneously be a member of a church, a citizen of the state, and a participant in any number of social spheres. In all these aspects of life, the basic convictions of the Christian faith would direct his or her activities. Believers live out their faith in whichever sphere of life they choose to participate. To picture how Kuyper’s system might appear, imagine that a prism has refracted light into its multiple colors. These colors represent the various social spheres of human existence—family, business, academy, etc. On one side of the colored lights stand the churches—guiding their members in the knowledge of God, which informs (but does not dictate) the basic convictions of each believer. On the other side of the spectrum stands the state, regulating the interactions among the spheres, assuring that the weak are not trampled, and calling on all persons to contribute to the common good. Neither church nor state defines the role of each sphere; instead, each derives its legitimacy and its role from God.

Kuyper, like Leo XIII, worked and lived in late 19th-century Western Europe and sought a middle way between the Scylla of state socialism and the Charybdis of autonomous individualism. Around that time, other social

⁴⁶ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* 98; italics original.

⁴⁷ Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, trans. Hendrik DeVries (1898; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1980) 129.

⁴⁸ I recognize that there are many questions of epistemology implicit here. I wish only to show that for Kuyper faith and reason are inseparable.

theorists such as Max Weber and L. T. Hobhouse were also proposing models for social interaction that included a plurality of social institutions. While acknowledging the similarities to Hobhouse and Weber, British theologian Elaine Storkey finds three elements in Kuyper's view that distinguish his thought from that of these other seemingly kindred spirits. First, while Weber and Hobhouse thought of the ethics of social institutions as deriving from their individual members, Kuyper saw them as having a divinely appointed role. Second, while for them the state was a neutral adjudicator, for Kuyper it was an active participant. Finally, while for them the relationships among institutions were fixed, for Kuyper those relationships must be constantly evaluated so that their boundaries and integrity are honored.⁴⁹ Each of these distinctions noted by Storkey is significant and contributes to an "organic" view of society in which various spheres develop and interact in relationship to an active, but limited, state.

In sum, I find many similarities between Kuyper's principle of sphere sovereignty and the principle of subsidiarity. First, both derive from a worldview that is assumed to be divinely ordered. Subsidiarity derives from natural law and sphere sovereignty from the Reformed doctrine of common grace. Second, both limit state-sovereignty and seek to develop the roles and scope of intermediate institutions. Third, both insist that all areas of life are influenced by faith. Fourth, both agree that the state can and should have an active role in society, but do not wish to see the state dictate to, or take over the roles of, lesser institutions. In general, the principle of subsidiarity seems to construct a hierarchy that leads to the common good, whereas sphere sovereignty provides a process by which diverse spheres may successfully interrelate. In the next section, I will note a number of the critiques of the principle of subsidiarity by Reformed scholars.

SUBSIDIARITY AS SEEN BY SPHERE SOVEREIGNTY

Reformed scholars have appreciatively noted similarities between Kuyper's theory of sphere sovereignty and the Roman Catholic principle of subsidiarity. Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977), the chief philosopher at the Free University of Amsterdam, has analyzed the differences. Addressing *Quadragesimo anno* he writes:

At first glance this principle [subsidiarity] seems to be another name for "sphere sovereignty." Yet a decisive difference exists between the principles of subsidiarity and sphere sovereignty. . . . The official Roman Catholic view maintains that the state and the lower societal communities cannot exhaust the reality of the individual as a "natural being." The rational law of nature holds that man depends on

⁴⁹ Elaine Storkey, "Sphere Sovereignty and the Anglo-American Tradition," in *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life* 189–204, at 191–92.

the community only for those needs which he himself cannot fill as an individual. The same natural law also holds that a lower community like the family or the school depends on the higher communities (ultimately on the state) only for those interests that it itself cannot handle. Basically, this hierarchical structure describes the content of the principle of subsidiarity.⁵⁰

Dooyeweerd's objection to subsidiarity is in part motivated by the view of the state in *Quadragesimo anno* and other pre-Vatican II documents. The state, as he understood it from Catholic social teaching, was the most perfect and complete community in the realm of nature. All other entities were incomplete without it. In addition, he could not understand how the state could achieve its own *telos*, when its nature was to be the composite whole of all the lesser entities. "Thomistic social theory considered the state to be the perfect human community. Its goal was the 'common good' of its members. I ask: *how can this teleological goal orientation help us define the internal nature and structure of the state?*"⁵¹ I believe his logic is this: if the state is the composite good of all its members, how can the state or lesser institutions have their own essential natures and *teloi*?

Dooyeweerd also objects to the notion that the lesser entities may finally be seen as parts of the state. For him, the other entities are "sovereign in their own sphere, and their boundaries are determined not by the common good of the state but by their own intrinsic nature and law."⁵² Dooyeweerd would object, for example, to the notion that the family is a nucleus of a series of concentric rings that grow into village, city, and state. Rather, the family and the state, as well as other spheres, have their own identity and purpose that are not part of any other. Richard Mouw sums up Dooyeweerd's position:

Dooyeweerd sees the Roman Catholic view as a hierarchical scheme in which the state is the "totality of natural society," with the church as representing an even higher manifestation "of Christian society in its supranatural perfection." In such a view, as Dooyeweerd describes it, communities such as family, university, and corporation are lower parts of these higher organic unities: families are organically subordinate to the state, and the state to the church. . . . By way of contrast, Dooyeweerd insists, sphere sovereignty does not merely prescribe a practical "hands off" policy; rather, the boundaries that separate the spheres are a part of the very nature of things. Neither the state nor the church has any business viewing the other spheres as somehow *under* them. Kuyper's scheme places "the different

⁵⁰ Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*, trans. John Kraay, ed. Mark Vander Vennen and Bernard Zylstra (Toronto: Wedge, 1979) 125. This is a translation of a series of articles in the weekly *Nieuw Nederland* from August 1945 to May 1948.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 126.

⁵² *Ibid.* 123.

spheres of life *alongside* each other” finding their unity not in some “higher” visible community but in the ordering of a creation that is ruled by God.⁵³

“Subsidiarity,” for Dooyeweerd, thus becomes merely a practical limitation on the powers of church and state, in which lower entities must be permitted to operate without interference from higher ones. Such a view of subsidiarity made it, in his judgment, incompatible with his conception of sphere sovereignty in which the spheres are independent from each other and distinguishable by their unique nature.⁵⁴

It may be that these objections lose some of their force when read in the light of John Courtney Murray’s writings on state and society and Vatican II documents. However, Dooyeweerd’s philosophical question is not quickly dismissed. How can the nature and goals of the state be the same as the composite of the diverse natures and goals of other entities that have their own nature and *teloi* within the *subsidiuum*?

More recently, reformed political theorist Jonathan Chaplin raised a question based on subsidiarity’s underlying metaphysic:

The notion of hierarchical ordering is fundamental to Thomist metaphysics. Whatever is made of its general merits, it creates evident difficulties when applied to the social world. While it is essential to acknowledge that human beings function within a *diversity* of communities, it is problematic to view these as ranked within a *hierarchy*. When we attempt to picture the multitude of communities, institutions, and groups which populate a modern differentiated society in terms of an idea of graded hierarchy, numerous questions arise. In what sense does the municipality rank “above” the family? Is the corporation above the union, or vice versa? Where are political parties or schools positioned in the hierarchy? And perhaps most awkwardly, in what sense does the church as the supernatural community crown the entire hierarchy? It appears difficult to find a satisfactory single criterion according to which a complete ranking could be achieved—which suggests that the very idea of ranking may be misplaced.⁵⁵

For Chaplin and other critics, the problem with subsidiarity is that it distinguishes among similar communities of different rank or size, but not among dissimilar communities or institutions. In subsidiarity (using a Thomistic social philosophy), the lesser or subordinate groups are portrayed as lacking or incomplete without the presence of the greater and higher groups. But this seems to be false. Is not the family, for example, self-sufficient, without the village, state, or church? Does not the state need the taxes of the business corporation and the citizens raised within families

⁵³ Mouw, “Some Reflections on Sphere Sovereignty” 93. Mouw is referring to Dooyeweerd’s *Roots of Western Culture* 127; emphasis added.

⁵⁴ See *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Jonathan Chaplin, “Subsidiarity as a Political Norm,” in *Political Theory and Christian Vision: Essays in Memory of Bernard Zylstra*, ed. Jonathan Chaplin and Paul Marshall (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994) 81–100, at 92.

as much as the corporation and the family need the state? Is a family somehow less than a state?

Instead of a distinction based on rank from greater to lesser, Chaplin and other Kuypersians posit that it is the nature of the sphere and the goal pursued within it that distinguishes one from another. For example, there is a sphere of economics, in which businesses pursue and promote productivity. There is also the sphere of the political, in which governments pursue and promote justice.⁵⁶ One sphere is not greater or less than the other, but different in nature and goal. Chaplin concludes, “The appropriate conclusion to draw here is surely that *each community performs subsidiary functions towards all the others.*”⁵⁷

Reformers also question the role of the church itself in subsidiarity. Dooyeweerd writes, “In the realm of grace, the Roman Catholic Church is the whole of Christian Society in its supranatural perfection.”⁵⁸ Thus while all the spheres of the natural realm are governed by the state, the church is the “perfect community” of another realm. “According to the Roman Catholic view, nature and grace cannot be separated in a truly Christian society. This means that the Roman Catholic Church may intervene in the natural realm.”⁵⁹ This leads Dooyeweerd to wonder whether the state or other spheres really are independent of the church, especially those found in “Catholic nations.” “The state functions as the total community of ‘natural life,’ but in those affairs that according to the judgment of the church touch the supranatural well-being of the citizen, it must always heed the church’s guidance.”⁶⁰

However, Paul Sigmund, a Catholic political theorist who has studied sphere-sovereignty, takes the view that recent historical developments in the understanding of the principle of subsidiarity make it more compatible with sphere sovereignty.⁶¹ He writes, “By the 1960s, subsidiarity no longer

⁵⁶ Chaplin develops his view of the state thus: “The authority of the state is not essentially a spiritual, moral, social or psychological kind of authority but a legal kind. It performs its subsidiary function towards other communities by means of law, by establishing a legal framework, embodying norms of justice and the requirements of the common good, within which other communities can operate. This is its unique contribution to the promotion of the common good. (Thomist writers have in fact always recognized that everyone, not only the state, contributes to the realization of the common good)” (ibid. 95).

⁵⁷ Ibid. 93.

⁵⁸ Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture* 129.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 131.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 132.

⁶¹ Paul Sigmund “Subsidiarity, Solidarity, and Liberation: Alternative Approaches in Catholic Social Thought,” in *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life* 205–20. Sigmund cites the Catholic Chilean economist Jaime Guzman as one who applies the principle of subsidiarity to economics: “A central element of subsidiarity is the promotion of private property and a free-enterprise economy as ‘the only

had hierarchical, corporatist, or authoritarian connotations. It meant the promotion of decentralization, encouragement of pluralism—including religious pluralism, federalism, and voluntarism—and support of international economic and political integration.”⁶² Such new directions also led Henk Woldring, political philosopher at the Free University of Amsterdam, to claim that “the differences between subsidiarity and sphere sovereignty are in fact quite marginal.”⁶³ Richard Mouw nevertheless concludes, “All things considered, the relationship between subsidiarity and sphere sovereignty is not an exact fit.”⁶⁴

The fact that they are a close fit, however, may be due to an interesting historical possibility, i.e., that Oswald von Nell-Breuning was familiar with the thinking and writing of Abraham Kuyper. It is widely recognized that Nell-Breuning was the principal author of *Quadragesimo anno*. Nell-Breuning’s collaborator on this work was a Jesuit from Antwerp, Alphons Müller.⁶⁵ It would have been virtually impossible for a scholar such as Müller, living in Dutch-speaking Europe in the 1920s, to have been unaware of so dominant a figure as Kuyper. The question thus arises: might

way . . . to protect individual freedom.” Sigmund also notes that in *Centesimus annus*, John Paul II “cited the principle of subsidiarity to justify the promotion of free economic activity and its creation of jobs and of new sources of productivity” (ibid. 214, 215).

⁶² Ibid. 213. See also Jonathan Chaplin, “Subsidiarity and Sphere Sovereignty: Catholic and Reformed Conceptions of the Role of the State,” in *Things Old and New* 175–202.

⁶³ Henk Woldring, “Multiform Responsibility and the Revitalization of Civil Society,” in *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life* 175–88, at 187. See also the chapters by Woldring and Sigmund mentioned above. (Kuyper founded the Free University, and Herman Dooyeweerd was from the 1930s to the 1960s its leading philosopher).

⁶⁴ Mouw, “Some Reflections on Sphere Sovereignty” 92.

⁶⁵ Nell-Breuning writes, “After everything had gone quite well for some time, P. Ledochowski became convinced that I needed an assistant, namely, P. Alphons Müller, professor at the business college of our order in Antwerp. This person then proceeded in short order to eliminate much—in fact, if my memory serves me correctly, most—of what I had put into the draft; what remained was, in my eyes, a ‘plucked chicken.’ At that point and in the nick of time a pastoral letter from the bishop of Strasbourg came to my aid. This pastoral letter, dealing with the same subject addressed to his diocese, had more pertinent content than what had remained in my draft. Thus I was able to make the case to P. Ledochowski that it was impossible to assume that the pope would desire to issue an encyclical that would make a very poor impression when compared with the pastoral letter from the bishop of Strasbourg. This proved to be the case. Nevertheless, I now had to wrestle with P. Müller over every little piece of my draft that I wanted to restore” (Oswald von Nell-Breuning, *Wie sozial ist die Kirche?* [Dusseldorf: Patmos, 1972] 128–29); my translation, with help from Sander deHaan of Hope College. My thanks to Phillip Chmielewski, S.J., for this reference.

the draft that Müller contributed to *Quadragesimo anno* have been influenced by Kuyper's writings?

SUBSIDIARITY AND SPHERE SOVEREIGNTY TOGETHER

Given their similar history and trajectory, what can the principles of subsidiarity and sphere sovereignty contribute to each other? In this section I will make some observations regarding their similarities and differences. These observations may suggest paths forward as both Catholic and Reformed articulate the place of religion and church in a pluralistic social order. One observation regarding the principles of sphere sovereignty and subsidiarity is that both seem to be culturally transformative. Neither, to use H. Richard Niebuhr's classic taxonomy, is of the Christ versus culture, or Christ of culture, type.⁶⁶ Both assume and explicate notions of social justice based on Christian teaching rather than simply adopting or rejecting the norms of society. Both assume that there are ways to structure societal associations that are more just and thus potentially more Christian than others. This observation regarding Niebuhr's typology is pertinent, as much contemporary ethics emphasizes virtues within religious communities but downplays the relationships among church members and other spheres of society.

Both the principles of subsidiarity and sphere sovereignty acknowledge the presence of an "order" within creation and attempt to enunciate principles that explicate this order in society. Neither denies (contra poststructuralism) that an order exists. Within the Reformed tradition order is present as a result of common grace and knowable as general revelation. Among Catholics natural law is the source of knowledge of this order, accessible to all via reason. Here the classical debate over Protestant and Catholic understandings of reason and sin come into play. Among Protestants reason is seen as fallen, corrupt, and at odds with the will of God. Among Catholics reason is seen as good and natural but incomplete and in need of grace. Recent studies suggest that a rapprochement on this subject is possible between the two communities.⁶⁷ Perhaps these studies will lead to renewed interest in social theology based on "orders of creation" and natural law as well.

A second observation is that both subsidiarity and sphere-sovereignty

⁶⁶ Whether subsidiarity fits within H. Richard Niebuhr's "Christ above culture" type may well be the point at issue when the Reformed object to subsidiarity's "hierarchical" nature.

⁶⁷ See, for example, the recent works by Stephen J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006) and Michael Cromartie, *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997).

need the counterweight of “solidarity.” The principle of solidarity, which shows that all humans partake of one family and one earth and are all sisters and brothers as children of God, provides crucial balance to subsidiarity and sphere-sovereignty. The Catholic tradition has made this explicit in numerous instances. For example, in 1971, the synod of bishops wrote: “Since men are members of the same human family, they are indissolubly linked with one another in the one destiny of the whole world, in the responsibility for which they all share.”⁶⁸ Applying the principle of solidarity to economics, John Paul II also wrote: “Interdependence [in international relationships] must be transformed into solidarity, based on the principle that the goods of creation are meant for all. That which human industry produces through the processing of raw materials, with the contribution of work, must serve equally for the good of all.”⁶⁹

While not as explicit, something akin to solidarity is also present in Kuyper’s thought and the Reformed tradition. For example, in his 1898 Stone Lectures at Princeton University, Kuyper made this statement, remarkable for a white, upper-class European male of the 19th century:

If Calvinism places our entire human life immediately before God, then it follows that all men or women, rich or poor, weak or strong, dull or talented, as creatures of God, and as lost sinners, have no claim whatsoever to lord it over one another, and we stand as equals before God, and consequently equal as man to man. Hence we cannot recognize any distinction among men, save such as has been imposed by God Himself, in that He gave one authority over the other, or enriched one with more talents than the other, in order that the man of more talents should serve the man with less, and in him serve his God. Hence Calvinism condemns not merely all open slavery and systems of caste, but also all covert slavery of woman and of the poor; it is opposed to all hierarchy among men; it tolerates no aristocracy save such as is able . . . of spending it in the service of God.⁷⁰

The principle of solidarity is thus clearly present in Kuyper, if not so named. Both Kuyperians and Catholics have the ongoing task of relating solidarity to sphere sovereignty or subsidiarity. This is crucial inasmuch as subsidiarity and sphere sovereignty are both principles that distinguish and show differences in the size and nature of associations. Solidarity, by contrast, balances these principles with its insistence that all humans are of one flesh and family, created as equals and before God.

My third observation is this: Both principles insist that the state is not the final authority in society. They do not permit the state to authorize or

⁶⁸ Synod of Bishops, Justice in the World, in *Catholic Social Thought* 288–300, at 289.

⁶⁹ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* no. 39.

⁷⁰ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* 27. On Kuyper and race relations see Vincent Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005).

legitimate other organizations or spheres. Instead, both see societal associations as divinely created and authorized. For example, a family is an association that is created by God, not the state. The state may indeed recognize the family and grant it legal status, but in so doing it is neither the author nor authorizer of family. Whereas the liberal political tradition insists that the best state is the minimalist state, and the socialist tradition see benefits of state action at all points, the principles enable genuine pluralism.

Differences remain, however. The two principles diverge regarding the role of the church. This is so in two senses. The first point of divergence has to do with the relationships between the institutional church and institutions in other spheres. The second has to do with the role of the church as privileged interpreter of the social order.

For sphere sovereignty, the church has a societal role only in the sphere of faith. This sphere is not a unique realm of grace that is different from nature, but one among the many social spheres. Within its own sphere, the church instructs and animates its members in the faith; faith being understood as “the function of the soul by which it obtains certainty.”⁷¹ This faith then directs the believer’s life lived outward to other spheres of life. The Reformed Church is thus the institution that trains and directs the Christian in his or her faith, and guides each believer as he or she reflects ways in which that faith might have influence in all spheres of life. The institutional church as such, however, does not act in other spheres. In fact, reformed believers do not normally welcome the presence of their own or other institutional churches in other spheres.

The difference may be illustrated with the following example. One Dutch Calvinist tradition has founded an international network of Christian day schools.⁷² The underlying belief is that of Kuyper: God rules over every square inch of ground, and thus every academic subject matter is a legitimate field of inquiry for Christians to pursue. The schools from this tradition, however, are owned and run by parents. While many or even most of the parents who own and run the school may be members of Reformed congregations, the schools are legally and functionally independent of the Reformed churches. Catechism is not taught in the schools, nor is Holy Communion celebrated there. Catholic schools, on the other hand, are tied in varying degrees to their parishes, dioceses, or religious orders—all parts of the institutional church. The Reformed would see this as an overstepping of one sphere’s institution—the church—into the legitimate territory of the school. In the Reformed tradition, the believer, informed by

⁷¹ Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* 129.

⁷² Christian Schools International (CSI) is a worldwide organization of schools founded by members of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

the church, lives out her or his faith in the various spheres. The church itself does not go forward into the other spheres.

Historically, the Roman Catholic Church has often sought to establish specifically Catholic schools, unions, political parties, and the like, based on the belief that the church as perfect community of grace must also guide the realm of nature. In his famous Christmas Message of 1944 Pope Pius XII declared that a sound democracy must be “founded upon the unchanging principles of natural law and revealed truths.”⁷³ Clearly, for Pius, it is the church that best knows what these truths are and feels confident in their applications for society. Paul Sigmund notes that such a stance can cause strain. “There is still a tension and there always will be between a hierarchical church that sees itself as a guardian and interpreter of divine revelation and a sociopolitical structure that decides public questions on the basis of free discussion, majority rule, and individual rights.”⁷⁴

The second point of divergence between the principles regarding the role of the church may also bear investigation. Does the Catholic Church claim privilege as interpreter of both natural and divine revelation? If so, it may seem, from the viewpoint of sphere-sovereignty, to be undermining the integrity of other spheres. The teaching of *Gaudium et spes* may clarify this point. In his study of this encyclical, Joseph Komonchak writes: “The Council went on to speak about particular spheres of the modern world: marriage and the family, the world of culture, economic and social life, the political community, and the international community. In each sphere it attempted to articulate the encounter between fundamental Catholic beliefs and values and the specific conditions of modern life.”⁷⁵ Is the church here claiming to be the source of true knowledge regarding these spheres, or is it simply seeking consistency between the Catholic faith and others spheres of social life? If the latter is the case, the church is simply relating its fundamental beliefs to its social teachings in a consistent manner. But if the church sees itself as the ideal community of grace, must it not have, at the very least, a privileged position of understanding of the natural realm? This being so, a point of divergence appears between sphere-sovereignty and subsidiarity. On the question of whether the church is the most consistent, or the most privileged, interpreter of the relationship between beliefs and other spheres there may well be two voices within the Catholic Church itself.

⁷³ Cited in Paul Sigmund, “Catholicism and Liberal Democracy,” in *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*, ed. R. Bruce Douglas and David Hollenbach (New York: Cambridge University, 1994) 217–41, at 226.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 237.

⁷⁵ Joseph A. Komonchak, “Vatican II and the Encounter between Catholicism and Liberalism,” in *Catholicism and Liberalism* 76–99, at 83.

Defining the number and nature of the spheres is also an area that could warrant further collaboration. In *Economic Justice for All*, the Catholic bishops claim that subsidiarity applies to a diverse range of associations. “Such groups include families, neighborhoods, church congregations, community organizations, civic and business associations, public interest and advocacy groups, community development corporations, and many other bodies.”⁷⁶ Is the list of associations the bishops here enumerate exhaustive, or is it an ordered depiction of what associations are? Notice the great differences in the nature, size, and purposes of the groups mentioned. What do they have in common? How are they different? How do they relate to one another, the church, and the state?

Dooyeweerd has addressed these kinds of questions.⁷⁷ In fact, he went into painstaking detail about how many spheres there are and what characterizes each. He argued that the spheres grow in degree of complexity from the mathematical to the sphere of faith, each building on the other.⁷⁸ He also provided a way of viewing the relationships among spheres. He averred that beings or entities in the higher spheres can use entities in the lower spheres in such a way that they participate in higher levels of the societal structure. Thus he advocated a hierarchy of complexity, rather than authority, size, or completeness. For example, a slab of marble in a mountainside is an object that has properties—chemical, mathematical, and physical, etc. (lower level spheres). When a sculptor takes that stone and forms it into a statue, the stone also takes on esthetic and economic and perhaps psychic properties that it previously did not have. The nature and use of the object has changed in light of the human/cultural action that is performed upon it. If the bishops desire dialogue about the nature and relationships among associations, a partner awaits.

A further question for the Catholic Church that rises from the side of sphere sovereignty is whether the next logical step in the development of subsidiarity might be a disengagement from other spheres such as family, academy, etc. By “disengage,” I certainly do not mean a removal of Catho-

⁷⁶ U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All* no. 308.

⁷⁷ Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, vol. 2, *The General Theory of the Modal Spheres* (St. Catharines, Ont.: Paideia, 1983). For an introduction to Dooyeweerd’s thought see L. Kalsbeek, *Contours of a Christian Philosophy: An Introduction to Herman Dooyeweerd’s Thought*, ed. Bernard and Josina Zylstra (Toronto: Wedge, 1975). See also <http://www.dooy.salford.ac.uk/> and <http://alpha.redeemer.ca/Dooyeweerd-Centre/> (accessed May 5, 2008).

⁷⁸ Dooyeweerd also argues that each sphere is ontologically distinct from the other and possesses its own “laws” that must unfold. Such thinking tends to focus on a social process instead of on actual instances of sin and misery that occur within the society. This problem has been addressed by, among others, Nicholas Wolterstorff in *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983) 58–59.

lic *faith* from family, academy, etc., but rather a structural and legal disengagement of the church as institution from other spheres. For example, might marriage become rather a civil or familial matter than an ecclesial one? I suspect this is not likely to happen, but the question of how the institutional church relates to the many and diverse spheres of life will undoubtedly continue to surface when such issues are addressed. The Reformed answer is that, while faith has a great role in all spheres, the church as institution has little role to play in this and other areas. Believing marriage partners are seen as blessed by the church, but the wedding is a family affair, recognized by the state.

Given the numerous points of contact and similarities between the traditions, the issues addressed above are only some of many that may bear further comparison and reflection. The principles of subsidiarity and sphere sovereignty have much in common. Both assume a similar anthropology, reject absolutism of the state or the individual, accept a created social order, and seek to strengthen intermediate associations. As seen above, they do work out these issues in distinct ways, since each tradition developed within its own unique historical and theological setting. Yet, both traditions continue to explore ways for Christian faith effectively and faithfully to have an impact upon society. Both do so in pluralistic societies such as the United States, where the role of faith in public life is contested. As theologians from these traditions, we may find it valuable to collaborate further as we work through issues that arise for adherents of a common faith within a shared society.