

Kuyper—Advocate for Academic Freedom

By Rene van Woudenberg¹

Editorial comment: It is not only church and state that are to be separate, according to Kuyper, but scholarship and state should not get involved in each other either. Van Woudenberg shows us that Kuyper did not establish the VU for nothing, free from state involvement, free of market influence, even free from ecclesiastical supervision. But how does that work out—free and Christian? And how can it be that in our time this original freedom is restricted? Time for a revived theory of sphere sovereignty.

The combination of the words “freedom” and “university” is not one to be taken for granted. For example, the philosopher Thomas Hobbes maintained in 1681 that the sovereign is the intellectual authority in the state and thus has authority also over the university. Universities must be disciplined to teach whatever the sovereign wishes. The background for this is the fact that at the time of the British civil war (1639-1651) universities were breeding places of rebellion against the British King Charles I. A free university is dangerous and has the potential of undermining power.

The combination of “free” and “university” recently was also the subject of report published by the Global Policy Institute, titled *Free Universities: Putting the Academic Freedom Index into Action.*” The report noted that, amongst others, in Turkey, Brazil, India and Hong Kong during the previous decade universities and scholarship have had their freedom seriously restricted. The report measures the degree by which a university and scholarship are free by five indicators.

1. The degree to which university faculty are free to give form and direction to their research and teaching.
2. The degree to which academic researchers are free to make their information available to the public either orally or in writing.
3. The degree to which a university has institutional autonomy.
4. The degree to which university campuses are free from politically motivated supervision.

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5. The degree to which there is academic freedom with respect to politics and politically sensitive questions, including freedom of cultural expression.

It is the degree to which a specific characteristic are present in a university, that the report expresses on a scale of 1-5. The report's point of departure is that academic freedom is essential for scientific advance, for the pursuit and discovery of truth, for research co-operation and for the quality of university education. In other words, the report assumes that in a hobbian university there will be no advance in scholarship, that the truth is neither sought nor served, that co-operative research is not really possible and that the quality of education will be low.

The Free University (Vrije Universiteit--VU)

While the hobbian idea of a university has a great friend in Kim Jong-un and to a lesser degree in Xi Jinping, it has a principal opponent in Abraham Kuyper. As no other, Kuyper has advocated and defended the freedom of all universities. The university founded by him already expressed anti-hobbianism in its name, the *Free* University. The official explanation of the name is that this university is free from state and church influence, which is to say that it is not a mouth piece for either government or any church.

At least partially, anti-hobbian motives have led to the establishment of other universities who have the word "free" in their name. In 1834, the Universite Libre was established in Brussels by free thinkers and freemasons, who adhered to Enlightenment ideals that were directly opposite to the traditional Catholic education of Belgium. In 1948, the Freie Universitat was established in West Berlin as a reaction to the restrictions on freedom forced on the Humboldt University in East Berlin by the Communist regime. In 1997, a free university was established in Bolzano, Italy, for the promotion of the free exchange of ideas and scientific knowledge.

Opening Lecture

One of Kuyper's most famous lectures carries the title "*Souvereiniteit in Eigen Kring*" or "Sphere Sovereignty." It is the lecture with which he officially opened the VU in 1888 in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam in the presence of a large and

diverse public. This lecture is a principal plea for the freedom of the university, not only that of the VU but of universities in general. The central idea is that human life takes place in diverse social circles, spheres, areas or worlds. Kuyper explicitly refers to the world of commerce, art, family, church and state, but also that of scholarship. These spheres do affect each other, but they all have their own task and their own laws. It would be unjust for one sphere to dominate another. A sphere can develop only when it can mature freely without external restrictions. The universities of Bologna, Italy, and Paris were originally established as private corporations, as guilds in which professor and student co-operate as master and fellow or comrade. Much later, said Kuyper, the church gained control over universities, something that did not help the free development of scholarship. Just look at the church's procedure against Galileo. During the nineteenth century the church's control over the university weakened, but now the state gained great influence. It is the government that appoints professors and the financing of universities becomes the business of the state. This, too, restricts the free development of scholarship. Ever the realist, Kuyper said, "It cannot be repeated often enough, money creates power *for* its owner and power *over* its recipient." If scholarship is to develop freely, it needs to be free from church and state and of any other sphere that attempts to turn the university into an instrument for the ruler.

The Nature of Scholarship

How now are the spheres to be distinguished from each other? It requires subtlety and phenomenological sensitivity to see and say the right things here. Roughly speaking, it is characteristic of the sphere of scholarship and university to focus on truth, that is to be achieved via research that is not influenced by the interests of church and state—and, I may comfortably add, of business or the military-industrial complex. Scholarship and universities have their own task, that is not to be restricted or governed from one of the other spheres. Scholarship and universities are "sovereign in their own sphere."

Free and Christian?

Herewith a plea is presented for the freedom of the university. But that does not represent a plea for or account of why in Amsterdam a new and as to intention *Christian* university should be established. Yet it was exactly that which drew such

a large and diverse public: to hear all about such a university. What would it look like?

It appears to me that to give account for a specifically Christian university arguments other than that of sphere sovereignty are needed. Kuyper gives the same argument in other places, amongst s in his *Stone Lectures* of 1898. That argument is that, roughly speaking, scholarship is not neutral but its practitioners base themselves on all sorts of fundamental, philosophical, religious and other influences. Scholarship is often practiced on basis of fundamental principles that are often difficult to account for. There is a diversity of such principles and by no means all scholars accept the same principles. As everywhere else, among scholars there is a diversity of fundamental visions and principles—and they make a difference.

What does this have to do with the establishment of an intentional and specifically Christian university? It is this: scholars need the freedom to practice scholarship on basis of their vision, given the specific principles they work with. Among Christian fundamental principles belong the fact of a living God who has created the world and preserves it from moment to moment; there is sin in the world, an eternal life and more. Kuyper's idea for a specifically Christian university was that research and education would be offered from this fundamental vision. His idea included that other universities would teach and do research out of their own explicitly developed principles. He was a radical pluralist and I can well imagine that many in his audience would be nervous with his argumentation!

Diversity

In the rest of this article I want to take a retroactive look from the current realities of academia at Kuyper's ideas about the freedom of the university, diversity and the role of fundamental principles in scholarship.

To begin with the last, there is much diversity in the academic world, too much to name it all. There is a diversity in universities, faculties and disciplines as well as a diversity in research schools and institutes. This is not a diversity that should make one nervous, nor a diversity that flows out of the various fundamental principles that people accept. It has to do with organization and practical division of labour.

There are still other forms of diversity that do not need to lead to nervousness. For example, diversity of research questions or research goals. It is possible that certain fundamental principles will lead people to value research in certain topics, questions and goals more than in others. Once one has made a choice, the motivation for the research often disappears. The philosopher of scholarship, Bas van Fraassen, pointed to this: “Scientific theories tend to forget their origin.” Newton was motivated in his scientific work by the religious motif to understand God’s creation, but you don’t notice that in his theory about gravity.

Scholarship Methods

It is perhaps somewhat different with research methods. There is not one single scholarly method, but a great diversity. The methods of, for example, the two disciplines of chemistry and linguistics vary enormously, but even within the same discipline there often exist a variety of methods. Usually they can peacefully coexist. For example, methods in statistics and methods for qualitative research can coexist and even combined, but that is not always the case. In the history of scholarship a number of *Methodenstreiten* or struggles about methods can be observed. Some of these have been solved, but others not and new ones can emerge. Disputes of this nature can be associated with deep differences about principles to which the disputing parties adhere.

Visions on Scholarship

It is even more different with visions on the nature of scholarship such as what they can teach us, what are its potentials and borders, what are their assumptions and implications. Allow me to give some examples. There are empirical visions, realistic visions and constructivistic visions. There are visions according to which one single or a few disciplines are fundamental, for example, nanophysics or evolutionary biology, while other disciplines take a back seat. There are visions according to which field is a source of knowledge and insight next to other sources; and there are visions according to which only scholarship delivers knowledge (scientism). Then there are visions according to which scholarship implicates there is no God and visions that say that we can understand scholarship only from a theistic perspective. These differences in visions are associated with fundamental principles that some accept but others don’t. It is this diversity that

makes some nervous, but not Kuyper. It is there, he noted, and needs to be acknowledged.

I am sharing this opinion, but want to add something important to it. This diversity in visions often has no direct impact on scholarly research. Researchers with different principial visions can often learn much from each other and cooperate. The reason for this is—and this is part of my principial vision—there is only one world and scientists try to better understand it. From this perspective, scholarship is an ecumenical enterprise. This does not mean that principial visions are insignificant, but it does mean that their influence on the give and take of scholarship are limited and indirect. Yet, they are of great significance because we also want to develop a greater vision, a vision of the world, our place in it, a vision on how scholarship relates to that world, to religious faith and to moral conviction. Such visions cannot be developed only on basis of science. Even the scientific vision that only scholarship can give us knowledge is a vision that cannot be supported by scholarly research.

Comparison

If we now look at Kuyper's opinions about the freedom of the university from the perspective of the current academic realities, than we can and must say a few things. I begin with the observation by a friend, the American Nicholas Wolterstorff, who was professor at the VU from 1989 till 1995, after which he was appointed to Yale. I cite a few passages from his memoirs:²

“The greatest difference between the American university system and that of the Netherlands is the decentralized shape of the former. There is no national university system in the US and there is no Minister of Education that sends directives to all universities in the land. The American system contains a great number of private colleges and universities that are financially independent and are not under public supervision. Of course, there are state universities, such as the University of Nebraska, but I know of no state in the US where a government representative has authority over the state

²² The following quotations are back-translations from Dutch back to English; they are not quotations from the original.

universities like the Minister of Education in the Netherlands has over the Dutch universities.”³

“While universities were at one time the place where the intellectual life of the nation was fed and passed on, in the Netherlands the universities are increasingly places where students are trained for the market place. Humanity departments are seriously restricted. This, it seems to me, is the unavoidable result of an education system in a capitalistic economy that is controlled and financed by the government.”

“Along with this redefinition of the university as servant to the economy, there is a passion for bureaucratic efficiency in the Dutch universities. New structures are constantly put in place. Small departments are either done away with or absorbed into larger units. To me as an outsider it seems that considerations of bureaucratic efficiency determine the character of education and research rather than the reverse, that bureaucracy serve education and research.”

A Feeling of Restrictions

Wolterstorff’s observations are shared by many insiders. In a thorough historical summary, Frans van Lunteren shows which factors and developments in the university corporation, as he calls it, have contributed at the least to the *feeling* of lack of freedom on the part of academic researchers. He points to new governing structures, flexible labour contracts, increasing rules, achievement agreements and quality measurements, requirements for appreciation or valorization and the pressure for public-private co-operation. Last year RensBod, Remco Breuker and Ingrid Robeyns published *40 Propositions about Scholarship*, in which they cracked some hard nuts about the current university system. Many propositions deal with the theme that in diverse manners, universities are restricted in their freedom and are increasingly becoming instruments for external purposes. Their idea is related to the ideas of Kuyper. They write,

³ I wonder whether a comparison between the Dutch national system and the American state system would not be more appropriate? Education in the US is not a national but state concern. The national comes in only when it interferes by dangling a financial carrot before the state educational departments. Might Wolterstorff be comparing apples to pears?

“The university is an academic community of scholars, students and supporters with the social assignment of performing independent critical thinking without turning its intrinsic significance into a subsidiary of other interests.”

With this, Bod c.s. repeat what was passionately argued by Floris Cohen, namely that the university is a value community and that it is a *Gebot der Stunde* or the urgency of the moment for universities to keep these values high. These are pleas for academic sovereignty in its own sphere.

Threat

It is not possible here to discuss in detail which forms the threats against academic freedom exist. But one threat is associated with the fact that with the results of research sometimes enormous interests are involved in what is sometimes called the “commodification” of academic research. Financiers of research can have such financial and economic interest in the results that they prevent research results they do not like from being published.

Another threat has to do with education. Because universities are thought to produce people who have good potentials in the market place, the core of academic structures often ends up in the backseat. The fear is that an economic approach to knowledge will bypass the intrinsic value of knowledge, that it bypasses the contribution that universities should deliver to the accumulation of wisdom and insight. Wisdom and insight around the accumulation of knowledge must also be free to develop.

As was said earlier, it is impossible to discuss in detail *all* real threats to academic freedom. The point is that academic freedom is an ideal that is always realized only partially and of which the realization will also generate debate and struggle. For politicians and governors, the Hobbesian university always remains a temptation.