

## A Mighty Intuitive Grasp:

### How Kuyper Arrived at the Notion of Sphere Sovereignty

By George Harinck<sup>1</sup>

Editorial comment: Everything that we think has already been thought before. Does that also hold for the concept “sphere sovereignty” of Kuyper? May he have borrowed this from Althusius or Calvin? From Von Baader perhaps? George Harinck’s answer is, “No!” The concept is totally authentic; Kuyper coined it as “*souvereiniteit in eigen kring*.”

However changeable or flexible Kuyper was and no matter how variable opinions about him are, there is one issue about which there is general consensus: the term “sphere sovereignty” is original with him and since then the term cannot be avoided in discussions about him in connection with social issues. He enthroned the concept on October 20, 1880, in the Nieuwe Kerk (Church) in Amsterdam in a lecture he delivered under the title “*Souvereiniteit in eigen kring*” at the founding of the Free University (Vrije Universiteit—VU). This lecture, one of his most famous and an explanation of the term, was programmatic. Historian Rolf van der Woude in his recent biography about the most important VU-financier, Willem Hovy, calls it a “farewell to the Protestant nation” and a “blue print” of the modern pluralistic society that was emerging.

No matter how original Kuyper was here, attempts have often been made to place the idea in a Calvinistic genealogy of ideas. It is regularly claimed that John Calvin was the source. Calvin had already written about creatures who had been assigned unique functions and purposes by God. Others pointed to the influence of the pluralistic political theories of the Calvinistic jurist Johannes Althusius (1557-1638). But an explicit connection between Kuyper’s notion and their ideas has never been found. The proposition I am about to defend in this article is that there is no such connection and that the idea is mainly Kuyper’s. To support my thesis I discuss two points: how Kuyper came to this idea and what others have argued about its origin.

### For a Free Church

---

<sup>1</sup> Prof. George Harinck is professor of history at the Theological University Kampen, the Netherlands, and at the VU. At Kampen, he is also director of the Neo-Calvinism Research Institute.

Like so many other Kuyparian notions, he first thought of this one early in his career. He used it first in 1870. At that time he was highly fascinated by the place of the church in society. According to modern theologians of his day, the public role of the church was past and the message of the church was to be translated in human values without dogmatic content, but Kuypar, to the contrary, placed her in the centre of the society and promoted her orthodox character. In order to fulfill this role, the church needed to be free from the state—and that's where it fell short. According to him, since 1816, in the new Kingdom of the Netherlands, the church was on the state's leash. He emphasized that the church needed to be free in its organizational life and thus free from the state. The church's lack of freedom was not accident or mistake, but the consequence of the dominant political vision of liberalism, which in turn was the fruit of the French Revolution. *Liberals granted freedom only to those who shared its ideals.* They regarded a free church as a threat, especially the orthodox church as Kuypar wanted it. The liberation of the church was therefore only a beginning. Ultimately, Kuypar wanted to liberate the entire society from the yoke of liberalism.

Kuypar was not alone in this struggle. After the French Revolution, an international anti-revolutionary movement sprung up. But Kuypar was special, because very early on he realized that merely criticizing liberalism was insufficient. An alternative system needed to be presented, something he found during the 1870s in Calvinism that had placed God's sovereignty at its centre. All sovereignty on earth emerges from that and is always restricted by it. The form and contents of his Calvinism still needed to be developed, but this is the core. He did not find a full social vision with Calvin, but there were points of contact for his plea for a free independent church. He also found in Calvin the idea that the ruler has no absolute sovereignty but only restricted. He found similar ideas elsewhere in the Calvinist tradition—Theodore Beza (1519-1605); Francois Hotman (1524-1590); with anti-revolutionaries like Edmund Burke (1729-1797) and Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859).

### **A Further Step**

Kuypar went a step further than Calvin. His sphere sovereignty expressed a consciousness of freedom from the state in order to live together in associations and that a restricted sovereignty of the ruler was no mere theological or political

idea. It was, he wrote in 1876 in his daily *De Standaard*, an ontological given. “The organs in which this life expresses itself, are no human inventions but are grounded in the essence of things and thus created by God.” This fact thus involved not only the state, but the entire society. In 1878, he summarized a long list of similar spheres: scholarship, art, church, family, city or town, agriculture, business life, commerce, charity, etc. After the Fall, government was added to this list to protect and guarantee the free development of the others.

When Kuyper delivered his lecture in 1880, it had become a general concept and seen as ontological in nature—and that’s where the uniqueness of Kuyper was hiding. The application of the concept only to the church had faded into the background; the notion was now recognized as of cosmic significance: “It existed from of old. It was embedded in the ordering of creation, in the conditions of our human life; it was there before state sovereignty existed.” This was not a clever idea, Kuyper emphasized, but simply “an acknowledgement or denial of the facts of life.” In connection with this notion in his lecture, he offered a blueprint of his social vision. All around him there existed the suspicion that with this concept he not only wanted to undermine liberalism, but, more, he also wanted to replace the liberal state with a Calvinistic theocracy; i. e., away with all freedom! Kuyper therefore emphasized two issues: first--the pluralism of society was embedded in creation by the Creator and as such an objective given; secondly—Calvinism strives after a *modus vivendi* with all worldviews, not only the ontological, but also the worldviewish pluralism in society that was guaranteed by Calvinism. Thus no domination by a liberal coterie, but equal rights for all.

This comprehensive expansion of sphere sovereignty was totally new. This was an alternative to two issues. One, to the liberalism that allowed for no freedom but only tyranny ; two, to the attempt of his teacher Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876) to establish a Protestant nation, which was in effect a demand of society for one single worldview. In Kuyper’s thought this new society took a central place.

How did Kuyper come to this golden grasp? We have seen that this notion of sovereignty historically developed with him in the 1870s, but it remains a puzzle how he arrived at this general and ontological concept.

## **The Question of Allard Pierson**

The issue also surprised the audience in 1880. One of them was Allard Pierson (1831-1896), a modern theologian admired by Kuyper, who resigned from the pastorate, had left the church and become professor in the history of art at the University of Amsterdam. Kuyper shared aversion to rationalism with him, a foundational factor in liberalism. Ten days after Kuyper had delivered his lecture, the daily *Algemeen Handelsblad* contained a large article by Pierson. His theme was: why did Kuyper start a Christian university when he did not even base the central thought in his lecture on the Bible, but, like any good rationalist worth his keep, based it on a logical rendering. Kuyper could not leave the objection of this man unanswered. In his response in *De Standaard*, Kuyper appealed to Calvin and his restrictions on the sovereign ruler, but he did not succeed in connecting his notion of sphere sovereignty with Calvin. He defended his lack of explicit appeal to the Bible with his argument that was no Biblicist. But, he insisted, he had definitely followed certain Biblical notions such as Paul's comment that God's invisibility in his work of creation can be seen through reason. By "seen through," Kuyper meant, "To know that there are sun, moon and stars, I do not turn to the Bible. Similarly, to know whether life is simple or nuanced, I do not go to Proverbs, but look through my window into life. This was his attempt to overcome Pierson's objection, but most likely not a successful one.

## **Could Althusius Be the Source?**

But academic kindred spirits since then have asked why Kuyper was not more definite by making it clear that he had borrowed his conception from the legal scholar Althusius? Among those who more recently posed this question are Ray Pennings, Marinus Ossewaarde, Simon Kennedy, Craig Bartholomew and even Wikipedia unabashedly makes this connection. What Althusius argued in his *Politica* of 1603 and what Kuyper averred looked like each other like two drops of water. Althusius had borrowed from French political thinkers, namely the so-called "*monarchomachen*," or opponents to absolute monarchy, the concept that the people are sovereign and had therefore the right to rebel against rulers who oppress freedom. This right held for the specific situation of the French civil war, but Althusius generalize this notion: sovereignty is the people's, not that of the rulers.

Althusius did not say exactly what Kuyper argued, but it can be imagined that he borrowed ideas from Althusius. Kuyper-biographer James D. Bratt was surprised that Kuyper ignored Althusius and Jonathan Chaplin suggested that he may have done so because Althusius was appealed to in defense of the modern German state. However, with the young Kuyper there is no historical evidence to be found that can support these suggestions. Not in *Ons Program*, not in *Souvereiniteit in eigen kring* or any other lecture, not in his papers *De Standaard* or *De Heraut*, not in his correspondence with jurists like Groen or Alexander F. de Savornin Lohman—nowhere! Groen borrowed much from the political thought of his German contemporary Friedrich J. Stahl, but even he did not seem to know Althusius. The name Althusius simply played no role in the 1870s, the time Kuyper developed his notion of sphere sovereignty.

### **The Later Rediscovery of Althusius**

Althusius was a forgotten figure during the nineteenth century. Voetius and Gortius still were aware of his work, but soon his name and work fell into oblivion. He was rediscovered only during the last quarter of that century. The German legal historian Otto von Gierke (1841-1921) swept the dust off forgotten German scholars and published *Johannes Althusius und die Entwicklung der naturrechtlichen Staatstheorie* in 1879. He recognized a connection between Althusius' thought and that of Jean-Jacques and the "Social Contract," an idea that, according to him, had a direct influence on the recent formation of the German state, something that Chaplin must have thought about.

Von Gierkes' book was not known in the Netherlands when Kuyper delivered his opening lecture at the VU. I have not found a single copy of the 1879 publication in any Dutch library, except at the VU, but they obtained it only in 1970. As far as I know, the first Dutchman who referred again to Althusius was Damme P. D. Favius (1851-1931), a professor of law at the VU. He referred to him with appreciation in an 1896 lecture, because Althusius promoted Calvinism and religious freedom. Althusius was known better in the Netherlands of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his *antirevolutionaire staatkunde* of 1916, Kuyper pointed to the second edition of Von Gierkes' book of 1902, but there he is critical of Althusius, because he provided no religious foundation to his political thought as French

Calvinistic thinkers had done. According to him, Althusius is on a marginal dead end in the Calvinist tradition.

Without realizing it in 1880, over against Pierson, Kuyper came close to Althusius. At the time, he brought the Calvinistic theologian Johann Heinrich Alsted (1588-1638) to the fore who had been appointed to the academy of Herborn five years after Althusius had left there. Kuyper mentioned him because Alsted had pled for a restricted state sovereignty, but by that time, Kuyper had already developed his notion of sphere sovereignty and even here it was only about political sovereignty.

### **Could Von Baader Be the source?**

Recently another source of Kuyper's idea has been proposed. The Canadian jurist and Dooyeweerd researcher, J Glenn Friesen, thinks Franz von Baader (1765-1841) is the source. It is true that Von Baader did reflect on the relationship of church, state and society, as Kuyper and many contemporaries were doing. The problem with the possible relationship of Von Baader's ideas with those of Kuyper is again there: one can find no evidence for it. Kuyper did know Von Baader's work and at times referred to it, though always with some reservation and not in connection with the question of sovereignty. There may be philosophical overlappings between the two, but that is different from historical evidence of Von Baader's influence on Kuyper's sphere sovereignty. Friesen does not come further than his proposal that the idea of an organic relationship of the spheres in society originated with Von Baader, but it is merely a proposition, a wish—and once again the historical evidence is missing.

### **Kuyper's Own Intuition**

Thus we are not making much progress in the search for the original of Kuyper's notion of sphere sovereignty, that, according to his opening lecture, leans on the idea that God's absolute sovereignty disempowers all other absolute sovereignty on earth by dividing life into spheres, each with its own sovereignty. Therefore I stand by my proposition that Kuyper's ontological notion of sphere sovereignty was not the cumulative result of knowledge that had been developed through the ages in an unbroken Calvinistic tradition, but that this notion was definitely his own discovery. He came to it by looking outside, but studying life. I am not the

only one to hold this position and refer gratefully to the dissertation of Jan D. Dengerink, who in the defense of his dissertation at the VU in 1948 called Kuyper's idea "a mighty intuitive grasp."